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r e v a l u a t i o n

INTERVIEW WITH LIZZIE BORDEN • '80s SCIENCE FICTION

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Front cover: Marlene Dietrich in *The Devil Is a Woman*.

Ed Harris and Jessica Lange in **Sweet Dreams**: one of Karel Reisz's best and most undervalued films.



EDITORIAL

THE ORIGINAL CONCEPT for this issue was to invite contributors to write on films they felt had been over- or undervalued, in an attempt to rectify the critical imbalance. Most of the articles conform to this concept, and require no further introduction. As the issue grew, however, a few deviations developed; the concept itself perhaps requires clarification (for some, defence).

Revaluation is the title of one of the finest books of F.R. Leavis, arguably the greatest twentieth century critic writing in English. As

Leavis's invaluable and incomparable contribution to the evolution of criticism has been **brutally swept aside by** the structuralist/semiotic flood, this seemed a suitable moment for a revaluation of Leavis himself—or, more precisely, of his potential role in the critical future. **My article may be read (correctly) as a critical manifesto.** If so, this must be understood only in personal terms: I have no reason to believe that it speaks for all of a very diversified collective. The concept of

'revaluation' obviously presupposes a commitment to evaluation as a central concern of criticism, and I am very much aware that such an assumption will not find universal favour within the current critical/theoretical climate with its emphasis on 'science' and 'knowledge' and its consequent distrust of anything as unscientific, provisional and personal as a value-judgment (as Leavis frequently remarked, a value-judgment is personal or it is nothing, though to be valid it must also be more than personal). I believe, with Leavis, that the notion of value is crucial not only to the critic but to the artist—to the artist who is of any consequence.

As for the other contents, it may be reasonably objected that neither *Blonde Venus* nor *Written on the Wind* is exactly in need of revaluation: both have received a great deal of critical attention, and both seem securely installed in the pantheon of Hollywood masterpieces. But the articles by Peter Baxter and Bruce Fairley illuminate aspects of these films that have not previously been explored. Baxter's article belongs to a tradition (the Lacanian) to which some (by no means all) of the *CineAction!* collective have tended to be unsympathetic. Unlike much of the writing in that tradition, however, it seems to me lucid and accessible, and it offers an interesting contrast with the very different approach of Florence Jacobowitz in her revaluation of *The Devil Is a Woman*. I think it was in response to something I said that Douglas Sirk, ten or more years ago, threw out the 'casual comment' that *Written on the Wind* was constructed according to the principles of Bach fugue. I have always been intrigued by that, and was pleased to find it systematically examined by Fairley.

In addition, this issue offers an interview with Lizzie Borden conducted by two members of the collective during last year's Toronto film festival (we still eagerly await the release of *Working Girls*), and articles on, respectively, the reactionary and progressive tendencies in '80s science fiction movies.

* * *

Readers may like some information as to how the *CineAction!* collective operates. It currently has eleven members; aside from the fact that we

are all (so far!) good friends, the only things we have in common are our interest in film and our commitments to a variety of politically left-wing positions (there is no attempt at imposing a political orthodoxy). Usually, two members volunteer to edit each issue, at the same time proposing the issue's main theme (the present issue is unique so far in having only one editor: no one else volunteered). The two editors (who are unpaid) are then responsible for the entire issue—for all decisions as to content down to more menial tasks such as proof-reading. We feel this avoids two equally undesirable but all-too-common alternatives: the magazine run by a single editor who imposes his/her tastes, opinions, interests and 'house style' on every issue; the magazine run by a committee, all the members of which read and have power of veto over all the submissions, with the result that everything controversial or idiosyncratic, or that antagonizes any of the committee members, tends to get rejected. No 'house style' is imposed here, neither do we rewrite, cut or alter articles without the author's permission and co-operation. This accounts, I think, for the diversity of the magazine to date: each issue has its own overall character, and each author is allowed to preserve her/his voice. Only the editor(s) of each issue, not the collective as a whole, should be held responsible for that issue, which may well contain work of which other members of the collective would disapprove.

We also welcome letters: in Leavision terms, the reader's 'Yes, but . . .' in response to the critic's implicit 'This is so, isn't it?'. (In some cases, of course, the response may take the form of a flat 'No!'.)

Robin Wood

by Robin Wood

Leavis, Marxism and Film Culture

IN ATTEMPTING to reevaluate the role of F.R. Leavis in the past history of criticism, and his potential role in its future history, within the pages of a contemporary film magazine, I am faced with a number of problems. To many of my readers Leavis will not even be a name, to many others, little more; others still will believe that he was disposed of once and for all a decade or so ago, when the theoretical hegemony passed decisively (though temporarily) to semiotics and structuralism, and that there is little point now in trying to resurrect a body of work that history has declared definitively dead and buried. There is the further problem that Leavis was a literary critic who never showed the slightest knowledge of or interest in the cinema, and regarded all contemporary popular culture as degraded beyond possible redemption: his relevance to the present and future of film criticism may seem tenuous, even negligible, and an attempt to suggest otherwise merely perverse, the more so within the pages of a professedly left-wing journal, as Leavis was explicitly anti-Marxist. It is necessary, then, to begin with some account of what Leavis stood for; it is the more necessary because, in order to discredit it, leftist British criticism found it expedient to reduce his position to the most simplistic parody, and it is the parody that survives: the occasional use of the term

"Leavisite" in modern criticism is scarcely calculated to encourage the reader to explore its source.

I should add that this article will inevitably be coloured by a strongly personal note. My own early works—books on Hitchcock, Hawks, Bergman, Penn, etc.—were commonly characterized (generally with hostile intent) as "Leavisite" or, somewhat more positively, "Leavision" (the distinction is that between blind discipleship and the acceptance of an influence). It is also widely believed (for a while I half-believed it myself) that I subsequently abandoned Leavis when I became committed to Marxist and feminist principles regarded (by, among others, Leavis himself) as incompatible with a Leavision standpoint. I now feel I have been more faithful to Leavis than I realized, and one impulse behind this article is the desire to reaffirm a commitment that has continued underground through a radical ideological shift, and which I hope can now resurface.

* * *

ONE FACTOR—a crucial one—that immediately suggests Leavis's potential interest for a left-wing critical practice is his uncompromising hostility to the critical and cultural Establishment, for which he was virtually ostracized at

Cambridge. As an undergraduate, I frequently saw his academic colleagues pass him by in corridors as if he didn't exist. He was repeatedly passed over for promotion, his work as far as was possible marginalized by the faculty of which he was unquestionably the most distinguished member. His crime was, essentially, a concept of 'seriousness' totally at odds with most academic practice and with British literary culture in general. The fundamental Leavision assumption is that a seriousness about art is inseparable from a seriousness about life. The seriousness that informs all Leavis's work places it, then, in opposition not only to the careerism of many academics but also to a rival concept of academic seriousness, the notion of 'scholarship.' Leavis's own scholarship was certainly formidable, and he despised dilettantism. The opposition was not to the cultivation of knowledge but to the familiar academic tendency to lose all sense of the relevance of art to the urgent problems of living, of values, of choices and decisions in a world outside the secure confines of the groves of academe.

Leavis's hostility was by no means directed narrowly towards academics. The force of his cultural analysis is generated partly by his perception that traditional academics, however insulated they may appear and may wish to be, are inevitably implicated in wider movements within a wider culture. Academics publish; their books are reviewed in literary periodicals, in weekly papers (such as the Times Literary and Educational Supplements), frequently by other academics, and are promoted by organizations such as the British Arts Council. Leavis saw all of this, correctly, as a net-

work of interlocking clubs of which the main condition for membership was the readiness to scratch other members' backs and not rock the boat: a literary culture characterized, overall, by careerism, mutual back-scratching, 'scholarship,' and liberal platitudes, a culture that can attribute to a Kingsley Amis or a C.P. Snow a significance beyond the merely symptomatic, and in which 'seriousness' can be regarded only as a threat. Beyond that culture was the wider culture of consumer capitalism and 'entertainment,' into the horrors of which Leavis seldom ventured (he had a secure grasp of its dominant characteristics, though not of the complexities and contradictions that underlie them). We are talking here of Britain in the '40s, '50s and '60s, but the description will seem depressingly familiar today.

It is not easy to define Leavis's critical position: it is magnificently embodied in his critical practice, the complexity, flexibility and subtlety of which resist reduction to theoretical formulation. He vigorously opposed any notion that criticism could be 'scientific' (which of course partly accounts for his rejection by semioticians). Adequately reading a great work of literature is a matter of sensitive and cultivated receptiveness; so, therefore, is teaching it, studying it, or writing about it critically. The emphasis on education provoked, predictably enough, the charge of elitism; yet the notion that one can only assimilate the full complexity of, say *Anna Karenina* or *Hamlet* if one has been educated to do so does not seem unreasonable. As Leavis frequently noted, no one questions the need for training and discipline in the field of athletics, or suggests that it is elitist to exclude untrained and unqualified beginners from Olympic teams, yet to suggest that a university English Literature programme should not be automatically accessible to anyone who wishes to enter it is to risk being branded as anti-democratic. (The same point applies, even more strongly, to university film study courses, habitually regarded (by students and many professors, including even some film professors) as 'soft options' for a relatively painless grade).

Central to Leavis's work is the proposition that the ultimate aim and purpose of criticism is evaluation ('scholarship' being a means to that end, never an end in itself). For Leavis, a sense of value in the arts is the index of a sense of value in life. To understand (and the understanding must be authentic and personal, not a matter of accepting accepted opinion) that George Eliot was a greater novelist than Thackeray, for example, is also to

understand a great deal more: the nature of true 'seriousness,' of 'intelligence,' of 'significance' (three key Leavisian words). For Leavis, 'intelligence' is never synonymous with 'intellectuality' (let alone 'cleverness'): to be 'intelligent' is above all to be intelligent about 'life' (another key word). It is of the essence of Leavis's position that these terms cannot be given a fixed definition: one might say that they are continuously redefined, for every age, by every great artist—the corollary of which (what Leavis's detractors would see as an impossible, unresolvable vicious circle) is that the great artist is definable as the one who redefines them.

It has become fashionable, in the age of semiotics, to argue that Leavis's sense that the most important critical concepts are not susceptible of fixed (or 'scientific') definition is the greatest weakness of his position; it seems to me, on the contrary, its greatest strength. For one thing, it acknowledges the provisional and relative quality of all valid judgements: they are valid (at least in the precise form in which they find expression) for the time and the place, for the cultural moment. 'Significance,' 'intelligence,' 'seriousness' answer to major human needs, but human needs, though a reality, are never fixed, are themselves undefinable except in terms of the specific cultural situation. There is a sense in which the values embodied in the finest work of Shakespeare, Tolstoy, George Eliot, have permanent relevance: as a model of 'seriousness' and 'intelligence' about living. But they cannot have the direct relevance that might enable us to read their plays or novels to cull practical moral suggestions as to how to conduct our own lives (certain of the dismissive parodies of Leavis have sought to reduce his position to idiotic notions of that kind). To put it bluntly: one reads Tolstoy to learn what it means to be serious and intelligent about 'life' and human needs, not to be told which side one should take on the abortion issue. Leavis's favourite and famous formulation of the ideal critical exchange ("This is so, isn't it?" / "Yes, but . . .") itself testifies to the provisional nature of value judgements, that they are subject to continuous modification and refinement.

Leavis's insistence that crucial critical terms can't be 'scientifically' defined calls into question the contemporary opposition Science/Ideology: on the one hand there is science (= knowledge), the demonstrably true, on the other ideology, the demonstrably false. It is time we recognized the unsatisfactoriness of this dichotomy, and in human terms its pernicious reductivism. As we are born into culture, our instincts, drives, primary

emotions, inevitably take on ideological form, but that doesn't mean that they are merely *reducible* to ideology: in other words, yes, there is such a thing as 'human nature,' though we must see it as endlessly protean rather than as eternal and unchangeable. Love, for example, takes on different forms in different cultures and many forms in one culture, and all that we can define precisely ('scientifically') are the forms, which are ideological; yet this should not lead us to deny the reality of love, even if we can never know what that reality *divorced from its forms* is.

We must repudiate above all the notion that 'human nature' is a construction of bourgeois ideology. Certainly, bourgeois ideology has attempted to impose its view of human nature as the only one, naturalizing itself and its institutions, passing them off as 'real,' hence unchangeable: this is one of Marxism's great, radical, seminal perceptions. But to leap from this to a belief that 'therefore' there is no such thing as human nature is a most extraordinary and dangerous *non sequitur*. It is rather like asserting that, because certain florists try to make artificial flowers that can be mistaken for real ones, there are no such things as real flowers. If there were not such a thing as human nature there would never have been such a thing as human society. It is human nature that makes us able to interact, to co-operate, to wish to understand each other; although, at some stage very early in human history, two principles—purely contingent on material conditions—were instituted that have made that interaction and co-operation problematic: private ownership and the subordination of women. We must believe in human nature if the human race is to continue: in the ability and desire to communicate; in the need to give and receive love and tenderness; in the drive for fulfilment and self-respect. It is quite ridiculous to dismiss these as attributes of bourgeois ideology: did the bourgeoisie really invent love? The human nature and human needs I am positing are clearly very fluid: they could take on an infinite number of social forms and ideological clothings. The social forms in which they have currently become embodied—represented at their crudest by the opposed but complementary ideologies of Soviet Russia and the USA—can only be seen as an appalling perversion and corruption (the history of which can be clearly traced) of the 'human nature' they profess to fulfil. It is only through a return to and overthrow of the origins of our contemporary disease (private ownership, the subordina-

tion of women) that 'human nature' can be liberated.

By this point it will be obvious that there is another reason for the rejection of Leavis by the semiotic/structuralist tradition: his position presupposes a notion of individual authorship, terms like 'intelligence' and 'seriousness' having meaning only in relation to a human source. In fact, the semiological school's attack on the idea of personal authorship rests upon another false opposition (and another reductive parody): the alternative to the notion that works of art can be adequately accounted for as cultural products is proposed as the 'Romantic' notion that they are produced out of the untrammelled inspiration of an individual genius, the result of some kind of immaculate conception. Both alternatives strike me as equally nonsensical, and Leavis's critical practice makes nonsense of both. For him, the great work of art is at once, and inseparably, the product of a culture and an individual living within that culture, an individual who is at once its product and something more. There is an obvious sense in which we are all 'products' of our culture. The problem of the word is that it suggests a total passivity and helplessness. We are not 'products' in the sense in which a can of beans is a product, because we are capable of understanding, criticizing, and, if we feel it necessary, repudiating, the culture that 'produced' us. Another necessary Leavision term (of which semiotics has perversely taught us to feel ashamed) is 'creativity.' Do we no longer believe in human creativity, because the latest 'truths' of semiotics have reduced everything to collections of signifiers awaiting deconstruction? If so, in the words recently immortalized by Bette Midler, 'Why bother?'

* * *

CENTRAL TO Leavis's concerns was a certain concept of the university and its role in cultural development. The background to this was a particular university, Cambridge, England, where I attended Leavis's lectures in the early '50s. Cambridge was far from realizing the Leavision ideal, but it was so different from (and so much closer to it than) the contemporary North American model (not to mention the modern British universities which that model has influenced) that some account of it may be necessary here.

The phrase that epitomized Leavis's concept of the ideal university was 'creative centre of civilisation.' However, one interprets terms like 'human values,' 'human needs' (an orthodox Marxist will

interpret them somewhat differently from a traditional humanist, let alone, for example, an orthodox Catholic), it is obvious that they are becoming increasingly submerged in the present drift of our civilisation: any serious conception of 'human needs' is not answered by consumerism, material greed, the quest for status and 'upward mobility,' or the cynical opportunism that characterizes 'democratic' party politics. Leavis's 'creative centre of civilisation' was, then, conceived of as functioning essentially in rigorous opposition to that drift. Like Leavis, the Cambridge English faculty at large saw itself as preserving a tradition within a world that threatened to render it obsolete, but the general conception of tradition was very different from Leavis's. For Leavis, any tradition worth preserving was dynamic and continuously developing and evolving, embodying a critique of the present and pointing towards possible futures. The 'tradition' represented by most of his fellow lecturers was, in effect, obsolete: it looked to the past, and sealed itself off from the world it should have opposed. Leavis's claim that literature and the arts should be the vital centre of the university could be argued only in terms of an ideal, not with reference to any producible actuality—apart, that is, from his own work and the achievements it generated, achievements most impressively and concretely incarnated in *Scrutiny*, the literary journal Leavis edited and sustained for over 20 years in collaboration with his wife Q.D. Leavis, herself a critic of great distinction. (Those who wrote for *Scrutiny*—mainly Leavis's own students—were seldom appointed to the Cambridge English school, which operated, again, on the principle of the 'club': the criterion for appointments appears to have been a readiness to conform to standards that Leavis could only repudiate. Again, the description is likely to evoke a strong sense of familiarity today).

However, if Cambridge was very far from corresponding to the Leavision ideal, it nonetheless had the potential to do so, as our contemporary universities have not. Crucial to that potential is its organization of the apparatus of study. At Cambridge, every student had a supervisor for whom s/he produced an essay every fortnight; the essay was read aloud and exhaustively discussed in a tutorial shared with one other student. Lecture courses were optional—one could attend 10 a week or none, as one chose—and they involved no essay-writing, examinations, tests or 'quizzes' (the very word suggests how low we have sunk). One attended a course because

one was interested, not because one needed another grade. This meant, inevitably, that many lecture-rooms were almost empty after the first week or two (Leavis's were almost invariably crowded, with students sitting on the steps and standing at the back and sides). Motivation, obviously, is partly constructed by the environment, its organization, its material realities. Cambridge at its best constructed student motivation in terms of a commitment to study for the sake of understanding; our universities today construct it in terms of 'making it': obtaining the necessary credits for the necessary degree to lead to the necessary job in the existing culture. (This is not to suggest that all students inertly submit to such construction; many, in varying degrees of consciousness, resist it. But, for lecturer and student alike, it breeds the cynicism with which anyone connected with a university today is all too familiar).

In a famous incident at the time of the release of *Deux ou Trois Choses que Je Sais d'Elle*, Jean-Luc Godard appeared on French television and brought along a real-life prostitute. In answer to protests, he remarked that prostitution is doing something you don't want to do, for money, and that everyone working for television was a prostitute. If one accepts the definition, then it is clear that prostitution is one of the central defining characteristics of capitalist culture. The principle certainly extends to our educational system: our children are taught prostitution from a very early age, and the instruction now provides the basis for a university education. To take a course in order to get a credit is prostitution; so is writing an essay in order to get a grade. Anyone who teaches in a university is confronted daily with the practical results of this system: "What do I have to do to get a B on this course?—I need a B to graduate": the prostitution is now not uncommonly as shameless as that. The university as a 'creative centre of civilisation'?—Leavis's challenging phrase now provokes little but a raised eyebrow. It is not the students' fault. Nor is it, on an individual level, the teachers': if we are honest we must recognize how difficult it is to refuse to become complicit, and how frequently we succumb, the disease being intrinsic to the system itself. The only possible effective response would be organization and mobilisation, involving both teachers and students. But we are very far, at present, from a revolutionary situation. The educational system is deeply implicated in the requirements and ethos of consumer-capitalism; so, too, are the universities' administrators (who will tell

you that "we must attract students in a heavily competitive world"), their teachers (who will tell you that "we have to compromise if we are to keep students in our classes"), their students (who will tell you that "we have to prepare ourselves to find jobs, we must face reality"—i.e. move from one form of prostitution to another). All this is known familiarly as 'being realistic about things.' Interest any of the existing political parties in a programme to reconstruct the university as a 'creative centre of civilisation'? **Don't make me laugh.** There is no established political party that would not be directly threatened by such a move; and, besides, it wouldn't attract many votes.

The essential point is this: **if not to the university, where, today, does one look for the 'creative centre of civilisation'?** The university was its last stronghold—and then in potential rather than actuality. We are constantly being told by the media how lucky we are to be living in a 'free' democracy rather than a police state, and to an extent of course we *are*. But just how far *does* this luck—this freedom—extend?—where are we to look, today, within our culture, for any central, influential and accessible location wherein a radical critique of that culture might be mounted? As the capitalist media gain ever-increasing dominance, infiltrating every corner, protest is correspondingly marginalized, pushed out into peripheries where it can do little harm: 'fringe' theatre, counter-cultural (hence under-financed and under-distributed) papers and magazines, small and often clandestine political groups. Meanwhile, *within* the media, Marxism is conflated with Stalinism and radicalism becomes barely distinguishable from terrorism. The university remains, in theory, the one central location where a serious critique of our culture and its values might have effect: but the university has now been fairly thoroughly co-opted by consumer-capitalism. Instead of a place where students might be encouraged to undertake a searching examination of our culture and their positions within it, it has become increasingly indistinguishable from career-training institutes of 'higher' education, its primary function being to slot students into positions within the *status quo*. **No, we don't live in a police state** (though we can scarcely doubt that its conditions could and would quite easily be imposed if it were found necessary—the machinery is in place); **but capitalism has its own methods, the more effective for appearing non-coercive, of inhibiting if not prohibiting free speech and free inquiry.**

What 'freedom of speech' amounts to within capitalist culture and a capitalist educational system is that we can ask any questions except the important ones.

The key document in the exposition of Leavis's view of the university, and one of his finest works, *English Literature in Our Time and the University*, (Chatto and Windus, 1969), originated as a series of lectures delivered in 1967. At that time it was still possible for Leavis to believe, though only with an obvious effort of will (**disillusionment and desperation can be felt lurking just beneath the surface of the argument, threatening its poise**), that his ideal was somehow realizable within the conditions of modern capitalism. **If that belief had finally collapsed, he would surely** (given his honesty and his constant striving for the construction or affirmation of positive concepts) **have felt compelled to rethink his attitude to Marxism, as the only available alternative.** We can see now, clearly enough, that the Leavision ideal was already impossible in 1967: even had it been possible to (re-)construct the university as a vital core of cultural development, it is impossible to believe that it could ever have significantly affected the general drift of capitalist civilisation. That drift is plainly irreversible. The only hope for 'life' must now lie in the collapse of the capitalist economy and the emergence of alternative systems out of its ruins. Leavis made the complementary errors of (more or less) equating Marxism with Stalinism and defining the 'enemy' as industrialization rather than as the capitalist organization that has controlled and exploited it.

Yet the Marxist rejection of Leavis in the '60s/'70s now **seems to parallel** the feminist rejection of Freud: both were perhaps necessary at a certain phase in the evolution of Marxist and feminist thought, both now appear in the long run misguided and impoverishing. Leavis, like Freud (or anyone else, for that matter) was partially circumscribed by the ideological formations of his time, place, class and gender, yet (again like Freud) **he produced concepts that can be developed to shatter those formations, concepts we simply cannot afford to jettison.** The impoverishment, the ultimate sterility, of a Marxist aesthetic founded upon exclusive notions of the 'scientific'—**an aesthetic that has led us by an internal logic both inexorable and perverse into the contemporary wasteland of 'deconstruction,' an aesthetic that feels duty bound to renounce all ties with humanism**—has by now become clear to many of us. There is something very curious about a Marxism that finds no place

for the recognition of individual skills, intelligence, emotion—in a word, for humanism. **The ultimate aim must always be, surely, the creation of a society in which individuals can develop and fulfil themselves to the maximum.** The possibility of doing so, however, must be available to *all* individuals equally, not merely to those of the privileged class, colour, gender, sexual orientation, etc. The values of capitalism must also be strenuously opposed and countered: the concept of individual fulfilment becomes perverted and ludicrous if it is perceived in terms of money, power, status, 'success.' **Fulfilment can be attained only through human co-operation, not competition, and only when the interlocking structures of power and domination that characterize relationships within our culture have been overthrown.** Such, roughly, seem to me the fundamental and constitutive ideals of humanism, and they could only conceivably be realized through a socialist organization—a Marxism informed by feminism and the revelations of psychoanalytic theory.

Humanism and Marxism must, for the validity of either, exist not as irreconcilable opposites but in total, inseparable union. **It is of crucial importance that Marxist thought be animated by the essential Leavision concerns embodied in the key words: 'values,' 'standards,' 'intelligence,' 'seriousness,' 'creativity,' 'life.'** Within a Marxist society, Leavis's concept of the university—or something closely resembling it—might prove realizable: it would be worth fighting for. One must add that—ideally—such a university would be run by the students: the problem being, of course, that today, thanks to the efficiency of consumer-capitalist indoctrination and the educational system that serves it, most students by the time they reach university age are too thoroughly constructed within the ideological norms—the norms of 'prostitution'—to be trusted to do more than repeat the existing patterns.

* * *

I HAVE ARGUED for the necessity of Leavis's rehabilitation: it seems to me that he should play a more central role in the development of a Marxist aesthetic than, say, Roland Barthes. That should not, however, suggest that there must be yet another either/or opposition. In fact, the dismissal of Leavis by the semiological school rests partly on a confusion between practices (and purposes) which, while interactive within any healthy aes-

thetic, are also in important ways discrete: the practice of theory (broadly, how things work in terms of general principles) and the practice of criticism (the interpretation and evaluation of specific works). The theoretical exploration into the functioning of classical narrative (Barthes, Heath, Bellour . . .) has been of immense value to the critic in recent years, particularly in relation to the continuous process of refining and redefining criteria; it in no way renders the function of criticism obsolete. Nor are Leavision principles (as embodied in the key words) rendered obsolete by the enormous advances in Marxist and feminist theory, the pervasive concern with ideology: they merely need to be expanded and reinterpreted, as Freud has had to be reinterpreted (occasionally against himself). It would be a curious and hopelessly impoverished form of Marxism or feminism that found no place for 'seriousness,' 'intelligence,' 'creativity,' or 'life.' I want to pass now to consider some of the problems and limitations of Leavis's position, as I see them.

1. *English Literature*: the two words to be understood both as a single term and independently. Leavis, though intransigently hostile to the dominant movement of British civilisation, consistently identified himself as 'British,' rooted in a peculiarly British tradition of thought and sensibility. He also saw literature—rather than the other arts—as central to cultural development, because it is the highest embodiment of language, our most direct and essential means of expression. Much of the strength of Leavis's work—its concentrated energy and force—doubtless derives from this sense of rootedness, but (like most strengths) it can also be held to constitute a limitation. That my own work has never achieved the concentratedness and authoritativeness of Leavis's may be due to the differences in my position (as well as to personal deficiencies): though my own sensibility was similarly formed within a specifically British tradition which I have neither the desire nor the ability to repudiate, I feel no commitment to preserving and developing a specifically British culture. My 'country' is Marxism, feminism, gay liberation . . . the major progressive movements of our age, which are necessarily international and transcultural (whatever particular inflections they may acquire within specific cultural situations). The essentials of Leavis's position are also extendable to the other arts: while Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, George Eliot have been and continue to be important to me, I

also want (say) Bruckner and Ozu to play major roles in my spiritual, emotional and intellectual life.

2. *Popular culture*. I automatically parted company with the 'pure' Leavis position when I began writing on the Hollywood cinema in the early '60s. Leavis's attitude to modern 'mass culture' was unambiguously dismissive: for him it constituted simply another aspect of all that threatened 'life.' He never found it necessary to explore a phenomenon like the Hollywood cinema and could not acknowledge the complexity of the issues it raises. This of course lays him open once again to the charge of elitism; it is worth pointing out that numerous Marxist approaches to mass culture have been equally dismissive. Adorno and Horkheimer, for example, are scarcely more helpful than Leavis in providing tools for an open and complex investigation of Hollywood films, though unlike Leavis they do provide a detailed and up to a point plausible rationale for their position in the form of an analysis of capitalism.

3. *Critical aims*. One may agree that evaluation—one's sense of value in works of art corresponding to one's sense of value in life—constitutes the highest aim of criticism. There is a tendency in Leavis to make it the only one, so that once a work or writer has been judged inferior it or s/he can be dismissed from further notice. This has perhaps been the commonest objection to Leavis, and it requires very careful qualification. One possible implication that might be drawn from it—that Leavis dissociated works of art from their cultural context, enshrining them in some metaphorical museum (or mausoleum) of Great Literature—is totally false: no critic has a surer or subtler sense of the interdependence of art and the culture within which it is produced. Far from viewing the artist as an individual, god-created genius in isolation, he continually stressed the perception that different cultural situations make possible different kinds of art, and that some cultural situations are more favourable to the production of art than others: the principle of evaluation, that is, applies not just to the artist but to her/his culture. At the same time, the emphasis on great works tends to overwhelm the other kinds of interest one can legitimately derive from even very bad works: the interest of what they reveal about the culture that produced them. I don't think Leavis would have seen the point of devoting several years to the study of the American horror film, for example. It would not have occurred to him either

that high value might be claimed for certain of its specimens or that the examination might produce important insights into ideological structures irrespective of the value of individual works. Neither would he have seen the point of devoting a book length study to the films of Katharine Hepburn; but Andrew Britton's splendid work is quite unmistakably in the Leavis tradition.

4. "Positive" values. Leavis believed that the greatest works of art convincingly embody positive values—that, however tragic or pessimistic, they achieve affirmation through their feeling for and commitment to 'life.' I entirely agree. The qualification I want to make arises from the difference between Leavis's cultural situation (or his perception of it) and my own. As I have said, he clung tenaciously, with what looks like the desperation of a blind faith, to the belief that our civilisation is somehow redeemable without changing its basic structures, that the battle for 'life' within it has not already been lost. Hence his completely negative attitude to what he perceived—to some degree correctly—as the forces or symptoms of disintegration. When one jettisons such a belief, and replaces it with the belief that our civilisation must effectively disintegrate before a new movement towards 'life' becomes possible, then the problem becomes more complicated. Leavis's inability to accept that the cultural situation was already hopeless and to take the necessary step into a revolutionary position resulted in two failures of insight. (a) He failed to see that the 'forces of disintegration' (he tended to lump together rock'n'roll, race riots, student protest) are not merely disintegrative but often carry strong positive implications within them. Not all student protest was merely irresponsible and nihilistic; even if it had been, the events of May '68 in France (some months after the lectures that make up *English Literature in Our Time and the University* were delivered) demonstrate how readily that irresponsibility and nihilism can be transformed into something quite other by the assimilation of Marxist theory. (b) If one relinquishes the belief that capitalist culture is redeemable, then the symptoms of disintegration become interesting in themselves—even take on positive connotations in so far as they can be read as pointing towards a cultural moment when revolution becomes feasible and popular.

5. *Evaluative criteria*. The fact that our criteria for judging works are likely to be somewhat different from Leavis's is more an apparent than real obstacle.



The Texas Chainsaw Massacre II: invitation to 'camp'.

Leavis's own sense of tradition as a process in continuous transition, development and transformation itself implies that evaluative criteria will never be quite the same from one generation to the next. Closer reflection, however, suggests that there are fundamental criteria that do not change, or change only very gradually. My own experience has been that a radical change in ideological position has had little effect on which films I value but a fairly drastic effect on why I value them. The implication is that there are levels of creativity (for the artist) and of evaluation (for the critic) that transcend ideological difference: precisely, the levels indicated by the Leavonian key words such as seriousness, intelligence, complexity. What changes is not so much one's awareness of the presence or absence of such qualities but one's awareness of how they are manifested—of how an artist's seriousness and intelligence not only produce statements about 'the human condition' but involve him/her inevitably in the movement of culture and the conflicts within it. My commitment to Marxism and feminism has revealed entire new

levels of meaning, and new possibilities of interpretation, in films like *La Règle du Jeu*, *Blonde Venus*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Tokyo Story*, that were previously closed to me. There is a passage of D.H. Lawrence (it occurs in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*) that Leavis was fond of quoting:

It is the way our sympathy flows and recoils that really determines our lives. **And here lies the importance of the novel, properly handled: it can lead the sympathetic consciousness into new places, and away in recoil from things gone dead.**

One can make the same claim for criticism, 'properly handled': its function should equally be to "lead the sympathetic consciousness into new places," and that involves a constant readiness to change and modify one's own position as one's perception of human needs changes. Which is not the same—is likely to operate in total opposition to—the common critical practice (at all levels from the journalistic to the academic) of drifting with the latest fashions, the latest fashions generally proving to be merely 'things gone dead' in new disguises, the

critics functioning as morticians applying a semblance of life to corpses.

* * *

IT SEEMS appropriate to conclude by attempting to apply Leavonian principles (suitably modified, along the lines I have suggested) to three recent films that either belong or relate to the horror genre, in order to suggest the kind of judgements to which they lead. I want first briefly to compare *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre II* and *Day of the Dead*, then go on to discuss *Blue Velvet* at somewhat greater length (though limitations of space preclude the detailed analysis that would be necessary to clinch the argument).

The grounds for comparing Hooper's and Romero's films seem obvious enough: both express an apocalyptic, totally negative and pessimistic view of contemporary American civilisation. **The essential difference is one of tone, the primary means by which the relationship of the spectator to the film is defined.** I want of course to argue for the considerable superiority of *Day of the Dead* (what

is at issue will be the grounds for the judgement rather than the judgement itself, which may well appear self-evident), but I think *Chainsaw II* has been undervalued. Certainly it is much more self-conscious and grandiose than its original, and lends itself more readily (and knowingly) to 'camp' appropriation. But its interest lies in the way it makes explicit, within the context of '80s America and '80s Hollywood (a cinema of empty and irresponsible reassurance), what was always implicit in the first film: the monstrous family as a metaphor for the ultimate debasement of American capitalist ideals. Here, the family have moved house to an abandoned and derelict amusement arcade, a kind of Disney-land devoted to celebrating the heroic American past, decorated with images of American heroes such as Davy Crockett, amid which the father justifies their conspicuous consumerism by reference to standard capitalist practice. Their nemesis is the ultimate American individualist hero (Dennis Hopper) who, answering chainsaw with chainsaw, is presented as every bit as psychotic as they are. Caught up in the midst of the conflict (as in *Day of the Dead*) is an active and resourceful woman—who, indeed, triumphs at the end, though the suggestion is that her victory (like that of Dietrich in *The Scarlet Empress*) has been bought at the cost of sanity.

The weakness of the film (it is also its insidious fascination) is its complicity with degeneracy—a complicity into which it draws its audience (which is perhaps another way of saying that it lends itself to 'camp' appropriation). The film's 'life' is relegated to its monsters (the family and Hopper). The crucial scene, irrelevant to the main narrative line, hence easily excised (as it was in Ontario), is the macabre love-scene in which Leatherface dances with the female disc-jockey after adorning her with the face he has removed, by flaying, from her male assistant in order to make her as hideous as he is: we are invited to find him the most attractive (because pathetic, confused and psychotic) figure in the film.

I wrote at length about *Day of the Dead* in *CineAction!* 6, and need not recapitulate my argument here in any detail. Suffice it to say that it embodies the Leavonian concepts of 'intelligence' and 'seriousness' as *Chainsaw II* does not. The comparison confirms the inseparability of those concepts from the concept of 'positive values.' It should also expose once and for all the naive, parodic assumption that 'positive values' are somehow synonymous with optimism

and happy endings. There is no question in Romero's film of drawing the spectator into complicity with the degenerate, the destructive, the monstrous: the attitude of analytical distance (which Romero proves to be not incompatible with the shocks required by the genre) is established from the outset and rigorously maintained, and this applies to all the film's monsters, the military and the scientists as well as the zombies. (The film's uncompromising resistance to 'camp' appropriation may help to account for its lamentable commercial failure). Our main identification figure is Sarah/Lori Cardille, who is presented as not only active and resourceful but also intelligent and aware. To juxtapose the two films is effectively to distinguish between pessimism and nihilism: while Romero's film offers no hope for our civilisation, Hooper's offers no constructive belief in anything.

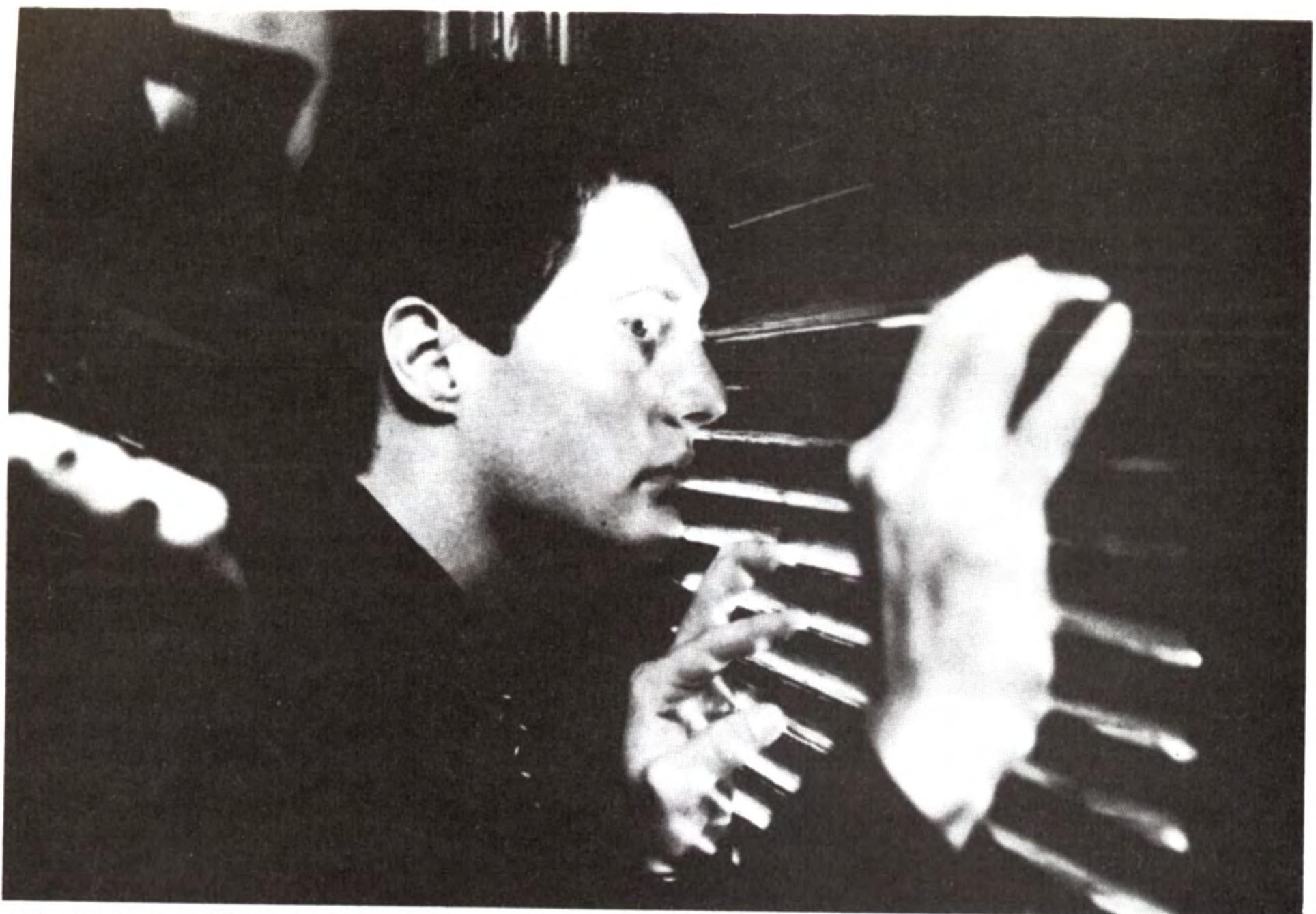
If I finally fasten upon *Blue Velvet*, it is partly because it is a film of undeniable distinction, but more because it has received so much critical acclaim: clearly headed, like its predecessor *Eraserhead*, for 'cult' status, it has already headed the '10 Best' lists for 1986 of a number of influential journalist critics, and was selected as the best film of the year by America's National Society of Film Critics (a 'Leavonian' judgement on the film is unlikely to be popular). From the noun 'distinction' derive two adjectives with somewhat different connotations, and in claiming distinction for Lynch's film I have in mind 'distinctive' rather than 'distinguished.' Like all Lynch's work it is highly idiosyncratic (whatever one may think of *Eraserhead* one must grant that its weirdness is authentic rather than merely manufactured), with all the stylistic signifiers of a 'personal statement.' Unlike *The Elephant Man* and *Dune*, it seems the work of someone—at least on a superficial level—completely in control of his material: the effects, that is to say, achieved through dialogue, acting, mise-en-scène, decor, composition, editing, etc., have a precision that convinces one that they are exactly what Lynch wanted. For many critics, of course, it is enough if a film embodies an idiosyncratic personal vision: its maker is then a 'visionary' and nothing more need be said. But the 'vision' of *Blue Velvet*, while indeed personal, also belongs very much to its period, and the phenomenon of the film's critical success cannot be explained in simplistic terms (what Richard Lippe calls "bastardized auteurism"). The personal vision, the way it expresses itself, the way it is received, the almost

unanimous critical adulation, have all to be understood in relation to a particular phase of cultural development.

Taking a cue from one particularly excessive manifestation of that adulation—the notion that *Blue Velvet* 'transcends' Hitchcock (Jay Scott, Toronto's *Globe and Mail*)—I want to compare the film briefly to *Shadow of a Doubt*. The choice is by no means arbitrary, the two films sharing a common thematic: the 'innocence' of small town American life; the apparent opposition of that innocence to a corrupt, perverted and dangerous 'under-world'; the revelation that the two are in fact intimately interrelated and interdependent; the resultant questioning as to whether 'innocence' has the positive value commonly attributed to it. One small detail is symptomatic of the vast difference between the two films: both Hitchcock and Lynch introduce their small towns with low angle images of benevolent and protective patriarchal figures, but while Hitchcock's traffic policeman outside the Bank of America is a resonant and evocative figure, Lynch's fireman beaming at the audience from his itinerant firewagon is merely ridiculous, a cliché rendered laughable, introducing the tone of parody/pastiche that immediately locates the film within the era of Post-modernism. *Shadow of a Doubt* is built upon a complex dialectic in which each side carries weight; in *Blue Velvet*, small town values, 'innocence,' goodness, are offered from the outset as patently absurd and risible, their emptiness a 'given' that precludes any need for dramatic realization.

Crucial to *Shadow of a Doubt* is Hitchcock's commitment to Young Charlie/Teresa Wright—that he is also committed, on another level, to her murderous uncle is crucial to the enactment of the dialectic). Her goodness and innocence are revealed as in a certain sense limitations (she has to learn to become aware of the evil her society produces and nourishes), but we are never invited to find them ridiculous. Indeed, it is precisely because they are convincingly realized as genuine and positive that the film is so authentically disturbing. (It is a characteristic of our world that to invoke such a concept as 'human goodness' is to risk inviting 'sophisticated' laughter, and it is no coincidence that the same world has declared *Blue Velvet* a masterpiece). Lynch's treatment of his 'innocent' characters (Jeffrey/Kyle MacLachlan and Sandy/Laura Dern) is very different.

It is fascinating to watch *Blue Velvet* with a large mixed audience: the spectators seem about equally divided between



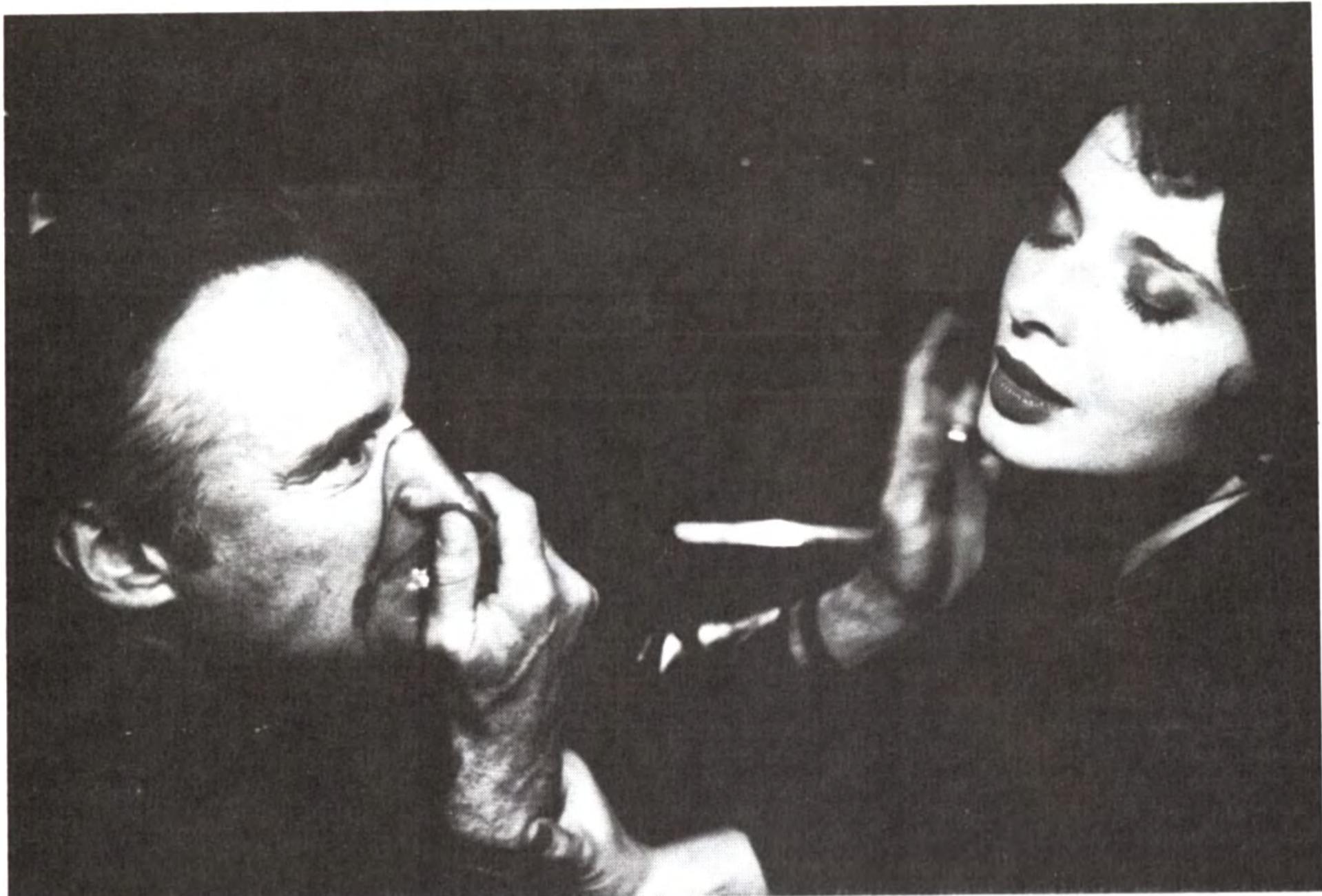
Jeffrey (Kyle MacLachlan) watches . . .

those who believe themselves to be laughing *at* the film and those who believe themselves to be laughing *with* it (it is possible to argue that the film is laughing at both categories). In fact, Lynch operates a double standard throughout, and one must admire the skill and precision with which he treads his difficult tightrope. The presentation of 'normality' (the 'innocent' heterosexual couple, their small town suburban family backgrounds) can be taken absolutely 'straight' by the more naive members of the audience (those poor shmucks) or as wittily and hilariously 'knowing' by the more sophisticated (those who laugh *at* the film presumably being somewhere on the borderline, seeing the absurdity but mistaking it for Lynch's naiveté). This might at first sight seem similar to the different levels of involvement permitted by Douglas Sirk's melodramas, where a sophisticated awareness of style and technique (composition, framing, colour, the use of glass, windows, mirrors, etc.) can create

a (loosely speaking) 'Brechtian' distance which appears not to have been perceived by the films' contemporary audience (let alone reviewers). But Sirk never treats his characters, or any section of his audience, with contempt; in his films the level of Brechtian distanciation is never incompatible with a commitment to the themes and quandaries of the melodrama. If spectators weep during *Imitation of Life* or *Written on the Wind*, Sirk isn't laughing at them: he is weeping too. Although the double standard of *Blue Velvet* does not appear to operate along class lines, one might relate the impulse behind it to Lynch's treatment of class in *The Elephant Man*: refined and sensitive bourgeois characters contrasted with a unanimously grotesque and brutal proletariat whose debasement requires no explanation or analysis beyond a few generalized images of urban industrial squalor. It is a characteristic of Lynch's brand of humanism (in any case a very dubious commodity) that it enables him to identify with an

abused and outcast 'freak' but not with any wider instance of societal oppression.

The two points where the double standard operates most clearly are Sandy's speech about the robins and the final sequence which answers it. On the one hand Laura Dern has been directed to deliver the speech 'straight'—if one attended only to the performance one might find it quite touching. On the other the speech is written not as an expression of innocent faith but as a parodic reduction (when the robins return love will be reborn and the world will be transformed). Finally, the backdrop for this is the lighted stained glass windows of a church. Religion (whether as social or metaphysical observance) plays no role in the film whatever: the church is, deliberately, a signifier without substance, the image's total lack of resonance strongly underlining the foregrounding of cliché, which some might wish to call Brechtian but which in fact expresses a cynicism totally alien to Brecht. (No wonder our



. . . the primal scene (Dennis Hopper, Isabella Rossellini).

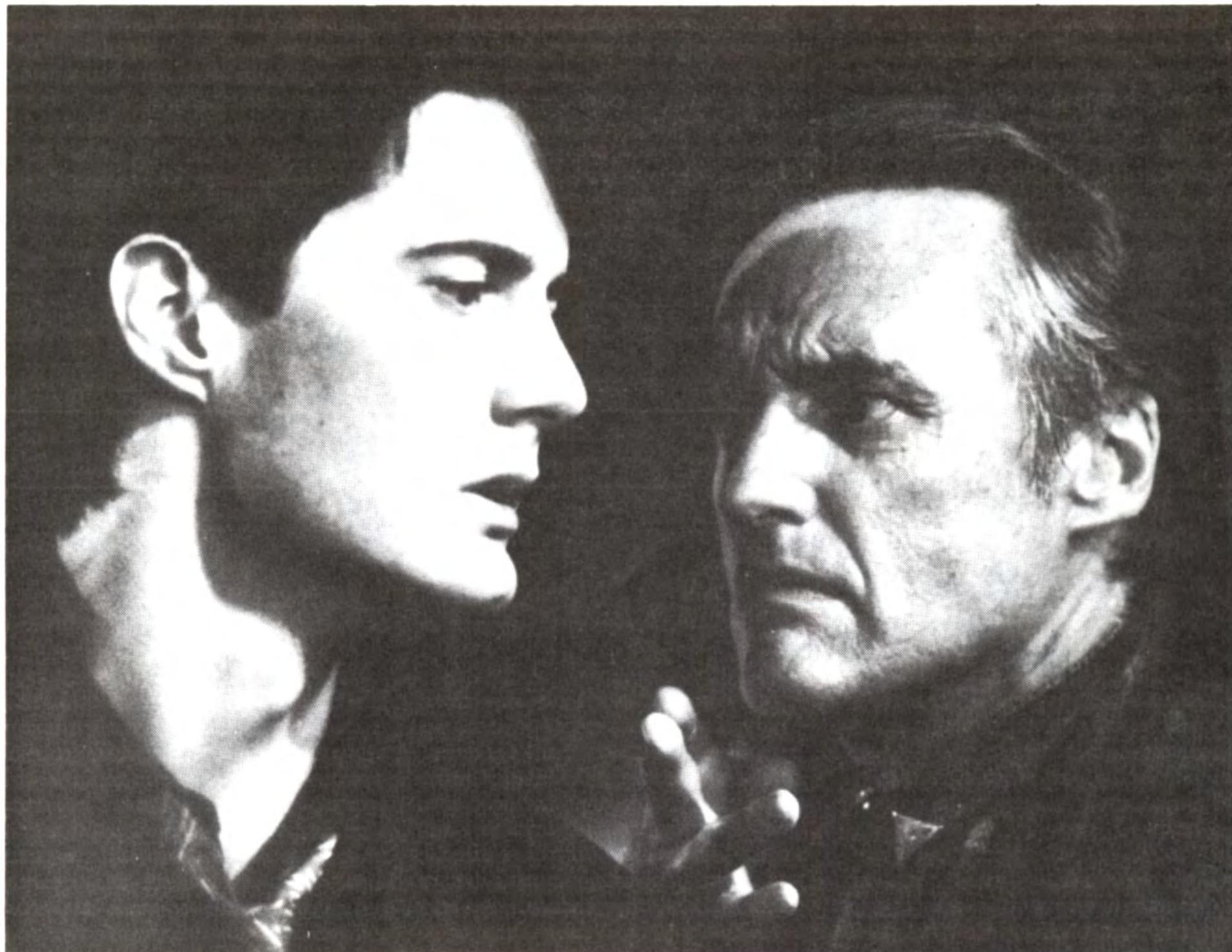
bourgeois journalist critics love the film so much: they epitomise the audience it flatters).

The final sequence is the conventional closure of classical narrative, once again foregrounded as cliché. Lynch certainly understands the conventions and their ideological significance. We are given: (a) the restoration of patriarchy in the figures of two fathers (Jeffrey's now recovered from the stroke he suffered at the beginning of the film), one of whom is a policeman, now friends as well as neighbours; (b) the restoration of Dorothy/ Isabella Rossellini, seemingly cured of the 'disease' of sado-masochism she caught from Frank/Dennis Hopper, to her socially correct role as mother; (c) the construction of Jeffrey and Sandy as the new healthy heterosexual couple, guarantee of the perpetuation of 'normality.' Finally, there is the appearance of the robin, first in the tree, then on the window-sill crushing a black bug in its beak. Lynch has pointed out with evident pride that it is a *mechanical* robin.

Again, some might wish to invoke Brecht, and the distinction between 'representation' and 'presentation' (the former invites the spectator to succumb to the illusion of a 'reality' that is in fact heavily ideological; the latter 'presents' the signifiers of that illusion, exposing them as constructions). On a fairly elementary level one can concede that this is what is going on. The effect ceases to be Brechtian in any important sense the moment one asks some obvious interconnected questions: For what purpose are we being asked (those of us who are sufficiently sophisticated) to deconstruct these conventional signifiers of normality?—What attitude are we being encouraged to take to them?—What alternative are we meant to envisage?

The last question seems to me the crucial one, and leads directly to a consideration of the film's presentation of normality's 'underside,' the world of the repressed, the world of subversive sexuality. This is clearly where the film's energies lie; it is also the aspect of the film

that especially attracts and impresses the critics, who are fond of informing us, with minimal variations of phrasing, that what is remarkable about Lynch is that he has a direct pipeline to his unconscious. I agree that the sequences involving Frank are the most impressive part of the film: they have a brutal intensity that might certainly be read as betokening a strong personal involvement. What the critics appear not to notice (or not to mind?)—and this is particularly striking in the case of would-be radical reviewers like the *Village Voice*'s J. Hoberman and David Edelstein—is that the film's treatment of sexuality is totally and unambiguously reactionary. The bedroom scene (in which Jeffrey, hiding in a closet, watches Frank subject Dorothy to sadistic sexual violence) is the most powerful and fascinating thing in the film, its power lying in its explicit connecting of sado-masochistic sexual behaviour with the patterns of domination and submission inherent in the patriarchal nuclear family structure: Frank



Blue Velvet: Jeffrey and Frank.

forces Dorothy to call him "Sir" and "Daddy," he addresses her as "Mommy"; he can achieve orgasm only by untying and restoring the umbilical cord (the blue velvet sash, one end of which must be held in each partner's mouth). The psychoanalytical perception here—together with the intensity of its dramatic realization—suggests that it is not after all inconceivable that Lynch might one day produce work comparable to that of Bunuel and Hitchcock (to whom the journalists are already, and prematurely, so fond of comparing him)—though probably not within the present cultural climate. The connotations of the 'primal scene,' the attribution of the dominance/submission attitudes of sado-masochism to the father/mother, husband/wife roles our civilisation calls 'normal,' Jeffrey's subsequent fascination with all of this and partial, horrified surrender to it: given a very different context, a film that was actually thought through, a film capable of developing such perceptions 'intelligently' and 'seriously,' the sequence

would deserve the adulation that has been showered upon it. But it exists in isolation, without organic connection to anything else. How, for example, are we supposed to relate it to Jeffrey's own familial relations, which are presented in a manner at once perfunctory and parodic? Frank's assertion that Jeffrey is just like him is left unexplored.

Worse: the kind of sexuality represented by Frank is offered as the only alternative to the conventional 'normality' the film ridicules. Frank and his entourage (including the grotesquely stereotypical 'faggot' portrayed by Dean Stockwell) come to embody quite a compendium of alternative sexual practices, but they are treated with unequivocal horror and disgust. (If the journalists are right and this under-world is Lynch's representation of his own unconscious—an allegation not exactly flattering and conceivably libellous—then the disgust is also self-hatred, but that scarcely makes it more interesting or progressive). The scene in which Frank smears his own mouth with lipstick and kisses

Jeffrey with a kind of horrified and horrifying passion before brutally beating him certainly has its auteurist significance in that it repeats the hysterical homophobia of *Dune*. Its point here seems to be the lumping together of bisexuality and sado-masochism as equal and equally loathsome components of the alternative to the 'normal' sexual conventions the film despises. One could easily argue that the two are diametrically opposed—that whereas sado-masochism is the entirely logical product of the patriarchal norms, bisexuality is what those norms strive to repress and deny. In any case, it is quite unhelpful to present either in terms of simple disgust and revulsion.

Where, finally, does this leave the film as a whole? Right back with what it purports to ridicule: suburban-bourgeois 'normality,' patriarchy, women as wives and mothers (and nothing else), the heterosexual couple restored to their idyllic innocence. If Frank represents—as the film seems to suggest—an unpressed version of Jeffrey, then what is

left but to restore repression? It leaves the film, to be precise, with a mechanical robin, as an image of a renewal and transformation it not only doesn't believe in but feels obliged to negate by parody and ridicule. The image epitomizes the film's essential emptiness and bankruptcy. Far from "leading the sympathetic consciousness into new places, and away in recoil from things gone dead," *Blue Velvet* is a supreme example of the mortician's art, a corpse with eyes staring open, its mouth fixed in a grimace, garish makeup applied. It belongs—with its cynicism, its negativity, its contempt—to the '80s as surely as *E.T.* and the *Star Wars* trilogy (the other side of the same coin): it reinforces all those aspects of our culture that a major artist would strive to repudiate or transcend. The film parodies certain basic structures of classical Hollywood narrative whilst remaining helplessly locked within them. To label it 'Post-modernist' may sound impressive (for many critics to affix a label to a work is mysteriously to justify it), but if *Blue Velvet* can be held adequately to represent Post-modernism, then a critique of Post-modernism and the cultural situation that has produced it is urgently needed. A civilisation gets, by and large, the art that it deserves.

* * *

Postscript: A Note on the English Language.

IT SEEMS (but nowadays isn't) a truism to suggest that a critic's quality is inseparable from how he writes. Leavis developed one of the great English prose styles, so flexible and precise in its inflections that it is capable of expressing nuance and complexity to a degree perhaps incomparable within modern critical writing. Yet many purportedly educated people (undergraduates in their final year, for example) today appear to find him virtually unreadable. Far from reflecting adversely on Leavis, this fact can be taken as marking the extreme degree to which the English language has been eroded.

Obviously, the main culprit is journalism. The majority of students today seem reluctant to tackle any writer who produces sentences extending beyond one-and-a-half lines. I have myself been through many dispiriting struggles with editors (even 'academic' ones) who have attempted to remove most of my colons, semi-colons and brackets and replace them with fullstops, producing a choppy journalese and depriving me of the opportunities for annotating vocal inflection and relative emphasis that

punctuation affords. Leavis's style never loses touch with the spoken language and the subtle movement of the speaking voice (it is of course significant that most of his critical writings had their origins as lectures). The long, complex sentences, with their many qualifying clauses, demand to be not merely read but *listened to*, and with total concentration: you can't read Leavis if you don't hear him. The slick, clipped sentences of journalism are utterly incapable of conveying that delicacy of nuance, that sense of poised and considered judgement and the awareness of the complexity of serious issues that it implies. But then when has journalism shown any interest or ambition in such areas?

More insidious, it seems to me, has been the devastation wrought upon English critical prose by semiotics/structuralism. Central here is the proposal that criticism should be 'scientific.' If the notion that a critic should possess an educated sensibility is implicitly scorned by journalism, it has been explicitly repudiated by the semiotics school. It is not simply a matter of the acquisition of a common jargon—though that is bad enough. If criticism is scientific, then it has fixed rules, which anyone with a sufficient IQ (something very different from Leavis's 'intelligence') can master; having mastered them, you can write criticism. The notion of an individual voice becomes not only irrelevant, it becomes anathema. Try an experiment: cull, at random, a dozen paragraphs of semio-logical explication by a dozen different writers; then see if you can distinguish them stylistically. (You will be able to single out Stephen Heath, if you have been fortunate enough to fasten on something of his). Unlike Leavis, semologists are not elitist. If there is a small problem that only a tiny elite can understand them, that is because everyone else is too lazy to learn the rules (or master the jargon). If we bothered to learn the rules we could *all* write like that, indistinguishably. So democratic.

I end, then, with a plea to my fellow critics to rediscover the resources of the English language (and with it their own voices), its capacity for precision, nuance and complexity, its quality as spoken language. They could not do better than begin with Leavis himself: for example, *Revaluation, The Great Tradition, The Common Pursuit, English Literature and the University in Our Time, Nor Shall My Sword . . .* (all published by Chatto and Windus). As John Keats remarked when he discarded his unfinished, Miltonic, latinized *Hyperion*, "English must be kept up." □

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Pasolini's *Medea*:
The Power of Disruption

by Anthony Irwin

THE WORKS (POETRY, NOVELS, ESSAYS, films) and even the personal life of Pier Paolo Pasolini have always provoked controversy and widely diverse response. In his native Italy Pasolini was both applauded and denounced by the all pervasive church and was involved, between 1949 and 1977, in no less than 33 judicial proceedings.² The charges, most of which were initiated in Italy, range from those condemning Pasolini's sexual practices (he was gay) to those which charged that his films held 'contempt for religion' and/or were obscene. The consistently explicit anti-capitalist and implicit anti-patriarchal nature of his work made Pasolini no friends among the establishment right. They, however, have not been his sole critics, for many on the left have been equally vociferous in their condemnations of Pasolini's films and ideas. Very generally, he has been criticized for his less than orthodox use of theory; in particular semiological and Marxist theory, the latter being of particular concern since Pasolini claimed to be a Marxist and in fact was a member of the Communist Party of Italy. Much discussion has centered on Pasolini's ahistorical representation of class relationships, which has tended to romanticize peasant and urban sub-proletariat classes by removing them from the historical context of class oppression. Instead, they are idealized as a rarefied form of humanity that remains uncontaminated by bourgeois values. The *Trilogy of Life* films have been cited as the most flagrant examples though films like *Theorem* (1968) with its ennobled peasant Emilia/Laura Betti and *Medea* (1970) with its mystical barbarian culture may also be included in the list. I would like to return to the question of a value in Pasolini's film work, notwithstanding this criticism; however, it is sufficient at this point to note that Pasolini's films have consistently generated strong response from a variety of quarters. *Medea* is unique in this respect. Among all of Pasolini's feature films from the mid-'60s forward, it alone has gone virtually unnoticed. Where it does receive mention, it is by title only, suggesting that it is rarely screened, or is dismissed altogether as an aberration in Pasolini's career. Oswald Stack's terse comments are exemplary in this respect.

Pasolini veered into the world of myth and mythology with *Medea*, a rambling amorphous poem around the (dubbed) person of Maria Callas. In no way was the film a success except perhaps in the choice of scenery. There is a sense of groping exhaustion, perhaps reflecting a dead end in Pasolini's mythical explorations.³

(emphasis my own)

Stack's unequivocal dismissal is unfortunate. I have found *Medea* to be an exceedingly rich film both visually and in terms of its unique narrative structure. Though the film may be characterized as being at times irrational (not amorphous), that must be read along with other elements of the film just as we 'read' irrationality in, for instance, a novel by Kafka or a play by Beckett. Moreover, the film is hardly a "dead end," or some errant "veer," for it can be tied thematically and structurally to the films which both precede and follow.

Medea is one of a cycle of films made during the second half

OPPOSITE: Maria Callas in *Medea*.

of the 1960s. It is the consistency of structural strategy in the feature films of this period which ties them together. The films are *Oedipus Rex* (1967), *Theorem* (1968), *Pig Sty* (1969), and *Medea* (1970), and what they share is a very clearly delineated two part structure. Strictly speaking, it would be fair to argue that *Theorem* does not belong in this list at all. I include it for two reasons. First because it is clear that the film is premised upon the same duality as the other films, and second, for ease of discussion; as shall be seen, the Terence Stamp character neatly embodies many of the characteristics of the other films. Insight to the meanings of this common structure can be gained by examining Pasolini's theoretical writing on film.

"The Cinema of Poetry," written in 1965, represents one of the very early applications of structuralist/linguistic approaches to film theory. As is always the case with Pasolini, the ideas are deflected by his idiosyncratic views and he has been sharply criticized for his 'abuses' of the theories.⁴ The article, however, analyzed as text—that is an analysis of the language used as well as the ideas expressed—serves as a useful key to the films and their significance. The argument of "Cinema of Poetry" is this: Unlike the written or spoken language, cinema is uncodified since it is not founded upon a communicative logic. Rather, it is based upon a complex of visual signs including the physical environment, human gesture and most significantly dreams and memory; in effect, a whole complex of signs which are largely 'read' through unconscious processes. Pasolini goes on to suggest that because these 'archetypes' of cinematic language "are of a virtually prehuman order, or at least at the limit of humanity"⁵ the basis for a cinematic language must also be prehuman and therefore irrational. Adding that the cinematic is never conceptual but is concrete and metaphoric, Pasolini concludes that the language of cinema is fundamentally poetic. However, the development of film as a commodity/spectacle in the capitalist era, has led attention away from its 'pre-grammatical' nature and towards a use which is stylistically akin to narrative prose:

This means that cinema has undergone a violation which was moreover rather foreseeable and unavoidable: everything in it that was irrational, oneiric, elementary, and barbarous has been kept this side of consciousness, has been exploited as an unconscious factor of shock and glamour, and upon this naturally hypnotic monstrosity which a film always is, there was quickly constructed a whole narrative convention.⁶

Immediately apparent in the essay is the manichaean framework that places a 'natural' cinema, associated with unconscious processes, against a 'constructed cinema' that exploits the natural. This is really the core of Pasolini, for it is this split that informs so much of his thought as it is expressed in the work of this period. Notably, and problematically, it is this split vision which informs Pasolini's view of class relations; the peasantry being aligned with the 'natural' while the bourgeoisie is the constructed 'unnatural' exploiter. It is this split vision that also forms the primary structuring principle of these films, a structure that amounts to two films within each film. On the one hand is what I will call 'film A,' a representation of current reality. In it we recognize images that correlate to contemporary life or, at the very least, as is the case with *Medea*, a past which is related historically to our own era. On the other hand is a film that clearly represents something other

than the above; something "oneiric, elementary, barbarous." The most immediate feature of 'film B' is a sense of foreignness that while created differently from film to film generally involves dramatic landscapes, obscure costuming, little or no dialogue, and an eclectic and extraneous soundtrack.

Central to 'film A' is the patriarchal figure who is the 'father,' both literally and figuratively. In *Oedipus Rex* the father is the military figure, in *Theorem* the capitalist factory owner, in *Pig Sty* the capitalist pig farmer, and in *Medea* the fathers are the King, Creon, and the 'upwardly mobile' Jason himself. Pasolini highlights the patriarchal nature of contemporary society and its concomitant values of hierarchy, acquisition and possession. The primary qualities of 'film B' are best explained by describing the way they are embodied in the Terence Stamp character in *Theorem*. Throughout the film he remains an unknown quantity. He simply appears and then disappears, his existence never explained or rationalized within the narrative. He is silent. He is defined solely by the representation of the physique of Terence Stamp. In terms of the other characters he might be described as the impetus to their sexuality. This description applies in varying degrees to each of the other films. In his analysis of *Oedipus Rex*, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has described this other world as being "one of primitive drives, primitive aggression, primitive eroticism."⁷ What becomes clear is that Pasolini's formulation of cinema in his writings and the resulting structure of his films draw an analogy to the Freudian conception of the mind, and the relationship between conscious and unconscious drives. 'Film B,' with its emphasis on the 'primitive,' what we might consider the unconscious, consistently threatens and/or disrupts the order of the patriarchal civilization represented in 'film A.' In *Oedipus Rex* the dreamlike central portion of the film contains the 'recognition' which shatters the idyllicism of the film's prologue. In *Theorem* sex with the mysterious visitor results in the complete breakdown of each of the family members, but most notably the father, who in the last shot of the film is seen naked and blindly stumbling over the smouldering landscape of the volcanic Mt. Etna. Mt. Etna is also the setting for the 'other film' of *Pig Sty* and while the cannibalism that is its most prominent characteristic serves to foreground the more 'civilized' cannibalism of capitalism, it also serves as an expression of antagonism toward the whole of patriarchal culture. The 'protagonist' refuses in the end to renounce his activities, to confess before the weight of the church. Instead, he declares: "I have killed my father and eaten human flesh and I tremble with joy." The films then are founded upon this dual structure which on the one hand is a representation of a conscious view of the world and, on the other, a representation of those elements repressed from consciousness which continually disrupt the surface of consciousness.

The highlighting of this structural aspect of these films is in one sense an unhappy endeavour since it presents what is clearly an overly schematicized view of a group of films that in reality are never so easy to contain. Its function, though, is to show that *Medea* is not the "veer" suggested by Stack but is a coalescence of concerns that had occupied Pasolini during this period.

It is not surprising that Pasolini turned to the tragedy *Medea* following these three films. There is of course the obvious interest in mythology that began with *Oedipus Rex*, but more specifically, Euripides' tragedy is, at one level, a dramatization of tension between two states of existence, two orders of logic, two sets of values: those of the 'barbarian' Medea and those of the 'civilized' Greek city state. The tragedy of *Medea* arises from the failure of the Greeks to acknowledge Medea and her right to exist among them. There is a strong similarity between the relationship expressed in Pasolini's films above and Eur-

pides' thematic concerns. *Medea* allowed Pasolini to fully integrate form and content. At the formal level the film is a representation of two orders, represented in two distinct film styles; at the narrative level it deals with the progressive movement of Jason and Medea away from one order, a liberated state that is before consciousness, and toward a consciously constructed state. Needless to say, the film is not a faithful rendering of Euripides' tragedy but is deflected by Pasolini's specific concerns. It is worthwhile, at this point, to outline the major divisions of the film.

Section 1

The childhood and adolescence of Jason.

Section 2

A fertility rite in Colchis over which Medea as Queen presides.

Section 3

Jason's quest for the golden fleece, his arrival in Colchis, the theft of the fleece and subsequent flight of Medea, Jason and company, their arrival in Pelias' kingdom.

Section 4

Corinth—This section adheres fairly closely to Euripides' play.

What Pasolini has added to the original is a direct representation of both Jason's youth and Medea's life in Colchis. The conventions of classical Greek theatre could never have accommodated such shifts in time and space. The addition of material, however, is more than a matter of what convention will or will not allow, for it gives an explicit emphasis to the earlier lives of both characters; while at the same time a parallel is created between their early lives.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, commenting on *Arabian Nights*, suggests that the film is an attempt to recover "deeper and deeper levels of memory and phantasy . . . [and that what is] most particularly being 'recovered' in *Arabian Nights* is some fantasied reprojected form of pre-oedipal sexuality."⁸ *Medea* in contrast follows a trajectory which begins in the 'pre-oedipal phantasy,' a phantasy of complete unity with the world, and moves steadily toward dissolution and the climactic moment of utter despair. The film opens abruptly with a shot of Jason the child basking in sunlight that spills through an open doorway. A voice explains: "You are five years old. It is time you were told the truth." What is most significant here is that the voice belongs to the mythical Centaur, replete with horse's body. The immediate effect is to differentiate Jason's youth from what we would call 'reality.' It is, rather, rooted firmly in the realm of the phantastic. The Centaur's words "All is sacred" figure prominently as naked Jason, or the two, are seen immersed in the potent colours of the natural environment. What is stressed is a unified world and, above all, a poetic sense of magical mystery in everything:

Look behind you
Is it something natural?
No, it's an apparition
Which you see
With clouds reflected in the sky.

The mythical quality is very short-lived and the Centaur is secularized as he suddenly appears with human legs and de-poeticized speech. I will return to a discussion of the mechanics of this section and its broader significance but at this point I would like to draw the parallel between Jason's early youth and Medea's Colchis.

The Colchis section of the film is introduced by a series of shots of people walking away from the camera. This notion of moving away, of receding, is central to this portion of the film for it establishes its foreign quality as some sort of regression.

This is the 'film B' of *Medea*. The sense of 'otherness' is achieved through a variety of techniques: the soundtrack, a cacophony of percussive and wind instruments, as well as manipulated insect sounds and human chantings; the costuming, unusual, at times beautiful and at others bizarre; the breathtaking rugged terrain (the film was shot on location in Turkey); and finally the style in which it is shot and edited. That style consists predominantly of short hand-held shots of static subjects. There are very few elaborate camera movements, the only extended pan coming just before the sacrifice of the 'king' and the ensuing eruption of motion around the fertility rite. The primary logic behind the editing of those shots is not one of linearity, an explanation in which one shot

answers its predecessor, but is more mosaic-like, each shot placed to add to the whole picture. What that picture stresses is a brute physicality. It is expressed in the evocative landscape, but even more so in human features, particularly the face, various examples of which Pasolini returns to over and over again. Most prominent in this regard are the features of Maria Callas whose powerful profile Pasolini records with near obsessive repetition. The sacrifice itself, a particularly brutal and directly represented event (though there is no exploitation of the violence), is a further example of this attachment to the physical. Moreover, it is exactly the kind of 'primitiveness' of which Nowell-Smith has written.

I have suggested that this portion of the film is established as a regression. What it regresses from, that is the shot which immediately precedes it, is Jason, the young adult, about to depart on his quest to reclaim his kingdom. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud states:

The deepest and eternal nature of man . . . lies in those impulses which have their roots in a childhood that has since become prehistoric. Suppressed and forbidden wishes break through in the dreams behind the exile's unobjectionable wishes . . .

It is precisely these relationships that Pasolini dramatizes in *Medea*. Jason's 'childhood' is associated with 'prehistoric' Colchis. And the 'exile,' Jason's gradual entry into civilization (read: the patriarchal order), finds as its corollary Medea's gradual loss of power as she moves further away from Colchis.

In the first section of the film, as Jason ages by 15 years, the language of the Centaur/man evolves to reflect changes in his outlook. What is initially exuberant highly poetized descriptive language grows increasingly grammatical and analytical as Jason grows older. The loss of the phantasy of wholeness of childhood is followed by Jason's unmitigated motivation, in adulthood, to possess. The patriarchal law which gives the son the right to possess the father's property leads Jason to the usurper Pelias, which in turn leads to the quest for the golden fleece and to Colchis. In a powerful filmic moment Pasolini contrasts Jason's new linear movement with the static unity of Medea's Colchis. In the final shot of the Colchis section of the film the 'royal' family stands in a box-like structure above the people. All is extremely still and silent. The shot is taken from straight on, and in its two dimensional flatness, resembles a medieval painting. Immediately following is a shot which is jarring in its contrast. It consists of a line of men (Jason's Argonauts) which forms a diagonal across the screen. The



ABOVE: Jason the adult: linearized quest. BELOW: Jason's mythicized youth.





The 'foreign' costumes of Colchis.

sudden perspective, the sense of movement explodes the balance of the previous shot.

What follows immediately is a series of eight scenes which represent Jason's journey to Colchis as a highly compressed linear movement. Just as one shot shatters the other, Medea's loss of power is related directly to Jason's drive for possession and power. She steals the fleece and is exiled from her country to discover that she no longer has power in the strange new land. Pelias' refusal to hand over his kingdom and Jason's subsequent renunciation is accompanied by a close-up of Jason's hand grasping Medea's. She in *his* consolation becomes *his* possession. In the scene that follows she is stripped of her dark inscrutable robes and amulets which are replaced by an innocuous frothy white and yellow dress. Finally, Medea is completely marginalized in Corinth where her plight is visually symbolized by the placement of her home which is both outside and immediately beneath the 'civilized' city state; suppressed beneath the weight of the patriarchy. At the same time Jason is in the process of consolidating his power by marrying Glauce, daughter of king Creon. It is significant, in light of Freud's statement above, that Pasolini presents the initial return of power in the form of a dream in which Medea sees herself destroying Glouce and Creon (the suppressed forbidden wish) through magic. The dream refers directly to Medea's past in Colchis via the soundtrack which virtually duplicates that which was heard during the fertility rite. Those elements of Medea's character which had been repressed in Corinth rise to the surface to shake the patriarchy at its base. The introduction of the dream also causes a distur-

bance at the film's formal level. The Corinth section of the film is very close to Euripides' original. It is rich in his dialogue, and, relative to the rest of the film, observes the unity of time and space, that is until the dream sequence which appears without any sort of parenthesis to indicate that it *is* a dream. The dream ruptures the relatively smooth narrative flow that characterized this portion of the film. The disjunction is so complete that when I first viewed the film I was certain that the projectionist had put on the wrong reel.

This kind of disjunction is the rule of the film rather than the exception and it occurs in various forms throughout. Of particular interest, largely due to their mysteriousness, are the shots of watermelons and children eating watermelon during the twice repeated sequence (once in the dream) in which the gifts are delivered to Glouce. The shots serve neither narrative nor thematic function, but simply appear, much as similar shots do in the films of Ozu. The effect though is to, however briefly, halt the narrative flow. A somewhat different disruption occurs in the initial section of the film. There Pasolini presents, simultaneously, two different versions of time. The first, real time, is carried aurally in the Centaur/Man's speech. In the beginning of the monologue the Centaur states "I am a liar. I love to lie," and near the end, "As well as a liar you think me too poetic." The speech has a logical consistency that one might expect in a 10-minute talk which is the duration of the sequence. However, as the Centaur speaks, 20 years of screen time elapse and Jason 'grows' from child to bearded man. The representation of contradictory times creates a disturbance, which again results in the disruption of narrative flow. It is the



The idealization of the peasantry: Emilia's progress to sainthood in **Teorema**.

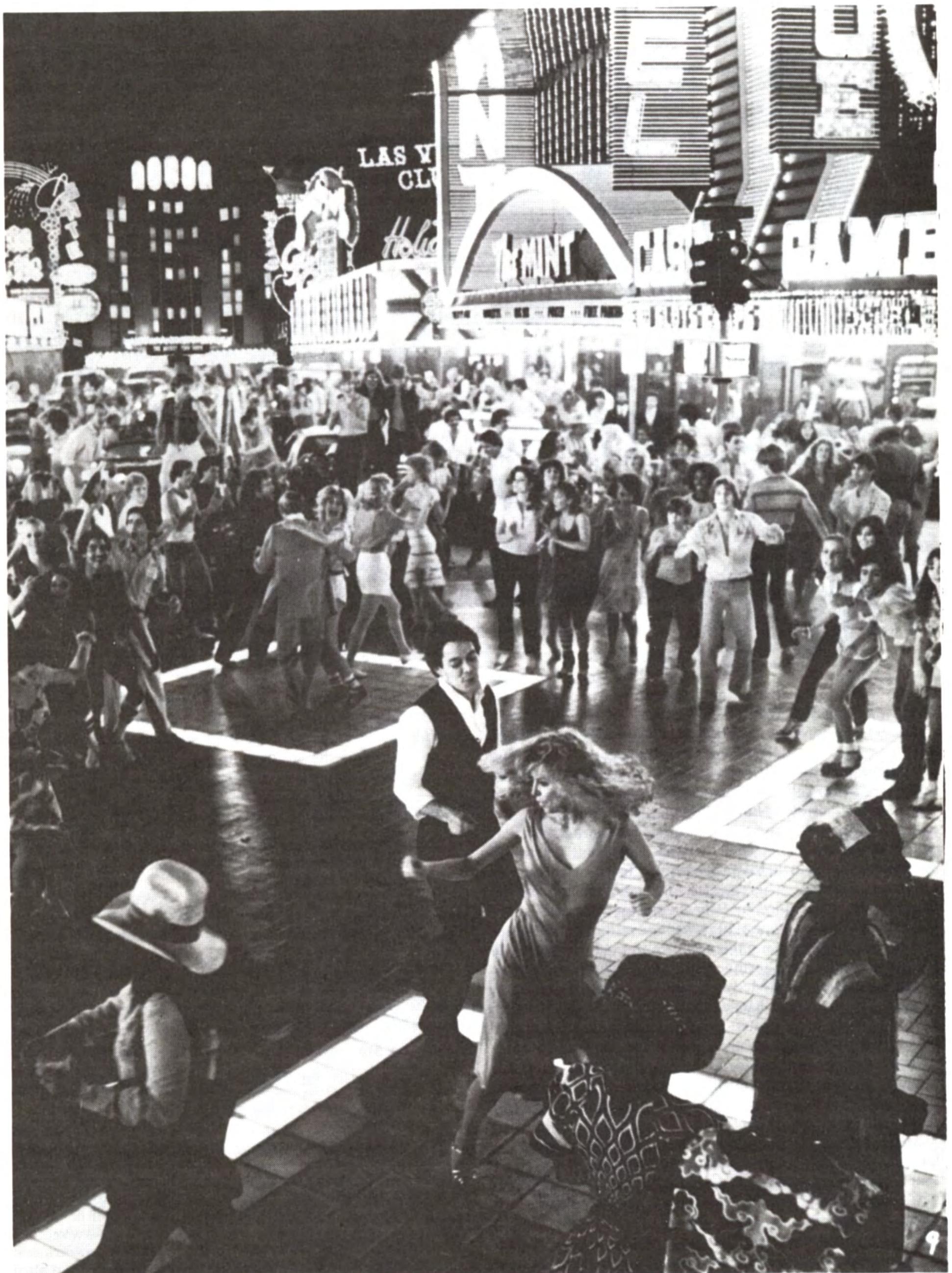
fragmented structure, however, that is the most pervasive source of disruption in the film. I have referred to one instance of jarring transition, yet all the transitions are abrupt to varying degrees. A jump cut throws the viewer into a new scene with no references to 'establish' what the scene is 'about.' To the extent that the film is fragmented so is the view of the audience.¹⁰ From this fragmented view emerge new ways of looking. The act of looking is highlighted in the film to the extent that the representation of looking becomes a recurrent motif. On Jason's first visit to Pelias, his point of view is expressed in a pan across the demure faces of the king's daughters. The shot, which suggests Jason's 'checking out' the women, is accompanied by Pelias' voice-over description of the golden fleece as 'symbol of power and authority.' At other points the film undercuts this implied authority of the male look over women by altering who looks, and at whom. Most notable are the shots of Medea's brother's sad fixed gaze upon the fertility king, and Medea's observance of the sleeping Jason. It is represented in a slow pan down his naked body which is intercut with another pan of the green and watery world that was the setting for Jason's mythical youth. It is this attempt, though never explicitly articulated, to democratize looking (and hence sexuality), to free it of the restraints of patriarchal values, that is of particular value in the film.

Medea must ultimately be seen as a backward-looking lament. It mourns the loss of some value of purity and unity that is directly associated with childhood; both the childhood of the individual and the 'childhood' of the culture. It is inevitable that such a project, which unequivocally negates what is, by positing against it what might have been, should collapse into the utter despair of the film's final scenes, and Medea's acid pronouncement (as flames lick all around her)

that "Nothing is possible anymore." In and of itself such nihilism is reactionary for it denies the potential for positive action against the status quo. However, the representation of nihilism can in fact be a positive force, for in the denial is a description of the status quo, and in the description, the demand for change. □

NOTES

1. Ideas expressed in this paper have been strongly influenced by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's very interesting article "Pasolini's Originality" in the BFI publication *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, 1977.
2. Tim Barnard, "Dossier on Censorship," *Forbidden Films*, p. 14.
3. Oswald Stack, "Pier Paolo Pasolini," *Critical Dictionary of Film*, p. 770.
4. See Antonio Costa's article "The Semiological Heresy of Pier Paolo Pasolini" in the BFI publication *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, 1977.
5. Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The Cinema of Poetry," *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols, University of California Press, 1976, p. 545.
6. Ibid, p. 547.
7. G. Nowell-Smith, "Pasolini's Originality," *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, BFI, 1977, p. 14.
8. Ibid, p. 18.
9. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Penguin, 1976, p. 280.
10. As an aside, I would like to take issue with suggestions that *Medea* is a vehicle for Maria Callas. Though Pasolini uses Callas' powerful physical presence, which is informed by the wealth of connotation that her renown as an opera performer carries, it is never to the extent that it overwhelms other elements of the film. The complexity of the film's structure prevents a strong identification with her, and though Callas is a central figure, she is not the entire film.



Artifice in **One From the Heart**: Las Vegas as movie set.

ONE FROM THE HEART

Learning from Las Vegas

by Susan Morrison

(Las Vegas is) a dream city, where the reality falls short of the dream, which is what the film is about.¹

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER IS TO ATTEMPT a re-evaluation of a film which, on its release in 1982, found no supporters in the critical arena, and no fans in the commercial one, with the inevitable result that it quickly slipped into total obscurity. Just as with Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, released the same year, Francis Coppola's *One From The Heart* was accused of being overloaded with visual gadgetry and excessive special effects to the detriment of the narrative. For both of these films, the public, which fully desired such diverting devices—weaned as it was on *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*—nevertheless could not come to terms with the thematics involved (a de-centred unheroic protagonist with a reduced set of expectations, among other issues). But, while *Blade Runner* has since found its recuperators,² *One From the Heart* remains untouched and unloved. It is to address and redress what I see as a gross undervaluation of Coppola's film that this re-evaluation has been undertaken. The intent of this brief paper is not to perform a close textual analysis of the film. Rather it is to bring to light what I see as some major areas of interest in *One From The Heart*: specifically, its thematic (Romantic Love), its setting (Las Vegas), its style (blatant artifice), in order to show how the film's seemingly banal narrative in fact complements its spectacular *mise-en-scène*, and in so doing, effects a critique of (filmic) conventions of Romance and Desire.

ROMANTIC LOVE AS REPRESSIVE FANTASY

If 'the same fantasies with the same content are created on every occasion,' if beneath the diversity of individual fables we can recover some 'typical' fantasies, it is because the historical life of the subject is not the prime mover, but rather something antecedent, which is capable of acting as organizer.³

IN "FANTASY AND THE ORIGINS OF SEXUALITY," Laplanche and Pontalis expand on Freud's concept of '*Urphantasie*' or original fantasy, by proposing the existence of three separate categories, each relating to the question of origins: the primal scene, relating to the origin of the individual; fantasies of seduction, relating to the origin of

sexuality; castration, relating to the origins of sexual difference.⁴

If we accept as 'given' that films are a public form of fantasy,⁵ then it follows that we should be able to refer to the above categories when looking at films in order to discern their psychical underpinnings. The second category, fantasies of seduction, is the one which will concern us here, for it is those fantasies that are reflected in films overtly about romance. (I say 'overtly' because, as Raymond Bellour has pointed out, most Hollywood films are concerned with the formation of the couple.) Romance films (or novels), like fantasies of seduction, are ways in which the passive (female) subject (a viewer, reader, daughter) actively re-inforces her passivity by making the 'other' (lover, father) the active one. The language of such romances ('carried away with desire,' 'swept off one's feet,' 'bowled over') reflects the passive project inherent within them. In this way, socially-prohibited female sexuality may be safely expressed, worked out in fantasy what in reality is forbidden.

(Romantic love) is seen as the means by which women in our society resolve the contradiction between being sexually desirous but not sexually experienced.⁶

The function of the (filmic) romance is salvation: diegetically, the lover saves the woman from an otherwise meaningless (because loveless) existence; extra-diegetically, the viewer is (temporarily) saved from a mundane and boring life. What is not dealt with, of course, is what happens after the filmic lovers marry. Implied in those romances with happy endings is that the couple will live 'happily ever after!' As Bernice Martin has noted, no one ever discusses the probable outcome—ordinary middle-aged domesticity, with its inevitable routinization and need for compromise and co-operation. Narratives concerned with such themes could only be seen as banal and boring by audiences fed steady diets of escapist romantic fictions. No-one, after all, wants to see 'real everyday life' up there on the screen.

It is precisely this issue of a 'banal and boring' relationship that articulates and motivates the narrative of *One From The Heart*. On the eve of their fifth anniversary of living together, Hank/Frederic Forrest and Franny/Teri Garr split up because of Franny's dissatisfaction with the relationship. "Life has to be more than this. If this is it, it's not enough," she exclaims in exasperation. Moving in with her best friend Maggie/Lainie Kazan, she justifies her leaving Hank by explaining, "I want to live. I want to go out with a bunch of guys. I want erotic things to happen." At work the next day, she meets a darkly handsome 'Latin lover,' Ray/Raul Julia, who offers her the excitement and romance she has been

missing with Hank. Meanwhile, Hank has found support in his best friend Moe/Harry Dean Stanton. He meets a very young, very beautiful 'circus girl' Leila/Nastassia Kinski with whom he has an affair, but ends up rejecting her because of his love for Franny. His attempt to forcibly take her back from Ray fails pathetically, and she informs him she is leaving for good, flying to Bora Bora with Ray. Hank drives to the airport and tries to stop Franny from going away (he sings her a song), but she informs him that it's too late. The plane takes off, and Hank returns home alone. In the darkened living room, he bends over the fire, about to burn the last remnants of their life together (clothes she's left around the house), but unable to bring himself to do it, he breaks down and cries. At that moment, Franny walks in the door, the room lights up, and they embrace.

WHAT MAKES *ONE FROM THE HEART* SO different from other Hollywood love stories is that it inverts the usual practices by effectively confronting the fiction of Romantic love, Romantic love as fiction. The film plays off the cliché of the great romantic experience (Franny:Ray and Hank:Leila) with the banality of an ordinary relationship (Franny:Hank), yet it is the latter which is valorized in the end, the *real* taking precedence over the *imaginary*.⁸

The device which enables Coppola to effect this inversion is his radical foregrounding of the artifice involved in filmmaking, a strategy which runs counter to received notions of classic Hollywood style. *One From The Heart* is structured like a theatrical performance, its beginning signalled by the turning-on of a single spotlight whose light fills the entire screen, and the subsequent opening of blue 'stage' curtains to reveal a full silver moon whose spherical shape replaces the spotlight's similar form. Its end is marked by the closing of those same blue curtains. While situated entirely in Las Vegas, the film was not shot on location, but on sets erected in a closed sound stage under artificial lighting, as was customary in the classic Hollywood musical. However, Coppola makes it quite clear that he has no intent of hiding this fact or pretense of ignoring it. Rather, the viewers are continually made aware of the materiality of the illusion. There is the blatant display of such theatrical conceits as a dissolving scrim which permits the camera to move back through one scene to another (from Hank in Moe's house to Franny in Maggie's apartment), and the use of coloured gels, especially green and red, which bathe the interior and exterior spaces in an eerie artificial light. Never once is the viewer reassured that there is a *practical* reason for this, that this is merely a filmed play—an excuse which might have justified or at least explained those histrionic devices. Coppola is as interested in cinematic illusion as in theatrical, for he displays in pyrotechnical fashion all the tricks of the trade, from the breathtaking opening credit sequence which uses animation and miniatures, to the use of superimposition throughout the film: Franny's face in the mirror superimposed over Hank's face, also looking in the mirror—they 'mirror' each other at the same time in their mutual anxiety over growing old; and Leila, appearing in a cocktail glass above Hank's head at a bar, or as a blue-lighted wall-size face chanting a rhyme about Little Boy Blue.

Sound, too, is used in a non-conventional manner in *One From The Heart*. Ostensibly a musical (an archetypally artificial form in itself), while the film has a practically continuous musical score written by Tom Waits, the songs are *not* sung by the film's characters. They are laid on over the scripted dialogue and sung by either a male voice (Tom Waits) or a



One From the Heart: Nastassia Kinski.

female one (Crystal Gayle), at times running like a commentary throughout the action, but also at times not really relating to what is occurring on screen. On at least one occasion, the score actually works against the visuals. One of the tropes of the film is that it is Hank who has to clean up after Franny, an inveterate slob. However, the first time he does that in the film, it is the *female* voice which sings the following complaint:

*The roses are dead
The violets are too
I'm sick and tired of
Picking up after you.*

Needless to say, the effect is one of disjunction, dislocation for the viewer. All the classical dramatic unities are broken, disrupted by the film's strategy of presenting itself as a construct. The action takes place on a Fourth of July weekend, yet the sole use of artificial lighting (the blazing neon lights of Las Vegas, the coloured gels, the fireworks, etc.) turns night into day and day into night, at the same time blurring the distinctions between interior and exterior spaces. Time and space thus dissolve, melting together in a spectacular display of ambiguities. One location slides into another (cf. the 'scrim' sequence mentioned above), 'reality' metamorphoses into fantasy. An extended example of this occurs when Franny and Ray are dancing the tango in a deserted night-club which presently transforms into a life-size replica of Franny's window design for Bora Bora, complete with (cardboard) balustrade overlooking a (painted) ocean in which sits an enormous (cardboard) luxury liner under a full (cardboard) moon. They dance through the set and out of it, exiting by doors opening onto Fremont Street, the main strip in Las Vegas, where they are joined by street people for a big production number.



One From the Heart: Teri Garr as Franny.

LAS VEGAS AS METAPHOR OF DESIRE

THE CHOICE OF LAS VEGAS AS LOCUS FOR the narrative is not dependent on the action—it could conceivably take place anywhere—but on the theme of the film. Las Vegas is an *unreal* city, its sole purpose for existence the pandering to libidinal excesses; greed, lust, envy—vices which eternally inform (and deform) human existence. The fast buck, the easy make, the free lunch act as lures, drawing the hordes to the casinos and nightclubs in dream of ‘hitting the jackpot.’ In *One From The Heart*, Coppola uses Las Vegas as a metaphor of desire in the Lacanian sense of an insatiable thirst for a plenitude which is forever slipping away from one’s grasp.⁹ The city *can’t* deliver what it promises. Although there are masses of people moving continuously through the streets, we never see anyone actually gambling. For all the magnificence of the familiar glowing neon signs advertising world-famous gambling casinos (The Sands, Caesar’s Palace, Stardust, etc.) they are in fact curiously disembodied, planted in the desert rather than the town. As signs of desire, they have been emptied of their significance, and used only as signifiers (. . . the reality falls short of the dream).

IN ADDITION TO THE ARTIFICE OF STYLE, Coppola employs artifice of narrative in the form of clichés. Franny, the ‘flako’ dreamer, works at the Paradise Travel Agency. Hank, the ‘solid guy,’ owns the Reality

Wrecking Company with his friend Moe. Franny’s first meeting with Ray occurs while she’s putting up a window display for Bora Bora. The camera, positioned outside the window, catches the reflection of a neon rainbow (“The Mint”) whose arc appears to come to rest on Ray (. . . *raynbaw*, the ‘pot of gold’ at the end of the rainbow). Tall, dark, handsome, impeccably dressed in a tuxedo, he offers a strong contrast to Hank’s more plebeian appearance. Ray seems to answer Franny’s quest for Prince Charming—the man who’ll make all (her) dreams come true. Leila presents an equivalent fantasy figure for Hank. She’s very young, beautiful, sexually free, and exotic enough in her profession—she’s an acrobat. What’s more, she wants no attachments, believing ‘Love is for suckers!’ The two lovers, therefore, embody all the characteristics of romantic stereotypes.

In the midst of all the artifice—the fake sets, fake lighting, fake city, and fake ‘lovers,’ Coppola chooses to place two very real protagonists. From their names alone we can surmise that they will be ‘ordinary’ rather than ‘extraordinary.’ ‘Hank’ and ‘Franny’ are not ‘romantic’ names that conjure up visions of glamour and excitement. For that matter, neither do the actors who portray them, Frederic Forrest and Teri Garr, second-string talents rarely placed at the centre of films (successful ones at least). Even though on several occasions Frederic Forrest/Hank’s manner of presentation alludes to the young Marlon Brando (with toga, as Marc Antony, and in T-shirt, as Stanley Kowalski), it becomes patently clear that he is *not* to be the ‘romantic hero.’ In fact, for him all the romantic clichés are reversed. When, after an argument with Franny, he shuts himself up in his room to find solace in his trumpet-playing, the audience quickly discovers that he can hardly play a note in tune. The ‘original’ love poetry that he used to court Franny at the beginning of their relationship turned out to have been written by a customer of his. When he has the opportunity of meeting Leila, Hank is barely articulate, mumbling to her that she has a “nice build” and a “lovely family,” not exactly the kind of language one would use to charm a woman ‘off her feet.’ He is the domestic one in the couple, cleaning up after Franny, preparing the meals. One of the most touching moments in *One From The Heart* arrives when Hank, in a desperate attempt to get Franny to stay with him, tries to re-shape himself as ‘the man of her dreams’ by singing to her (“You never sing to me!”). Not only does he choose an exceedingly banal song, “You are my Sunshine,” but his voice cracks and wobbles out of key. In all ways, therefore, Coppola accentuates the very mundane reality of his protagonists. There are no surprises, only the acceptance of a relationship that just might be worth saving.

CONCLUSION

HERE IS A KIND OF FRICTION THAT OCCURS as a result of the ‘mis-fit’ between the artificial devices employed by Coppola and the ‘ordinary and boring’ story being told. Some critics have complained that Coppola’s films combine a ‘daunting mixture of the pretentious and the banal.’¹⁰ However, what I would like to suggest is that the friction is not the result of insubstantial filmmaking, but is in fact a strategy designed to perform a task similar to Brecht’s concept of *distanciation*. In *One from The Heart* the audience, confronted with a blatantly artificial fabrication made all the more blatant by having Franny and Hank placed as ‘foils’ at the centre of all the excess, is forced thereby to recognize the themes being played out for what they are—illusion, not reality.



One From the Heart: Franny leaves home.

THIS PAPER WAS UNDERTAKEN TO PUT forth for consideration some of the features of *One From The Heart* which I feel make it worth a second (or first) look. The issue of artifice in Hollywood films is one area which certainly warrants further and deeper investigation than was possible within the parameters set for this brief investigation. Traditionally, Hollywood has presented its illusion as reality. Rarely have films which foreground their artifice been accepted by the public. The one exception is the musical, especially the Busby Berkeley and Vincente Minnelli varieties, which play up the 'phoniness' of their sets, etc. The discrepancy is possibly due to the musical's sources in the legitimate theatre, where audiences easily accepted the cessation of narrative so that songs could be delivered. It is interesting to note that a recent musical, Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York* (1976), which incorporated the songs and music into the action, fared miserably with the public. Like *One From The Heart*, it, too, had an anti-Romantic theme. Fruitful work could be done in comparing *One From The Heart* with *New York, New York* as contemporary examples of the musical. Other possible places for research could be the Sirkian melodrama (e.g., *Written on the Wind*, *Imitation of Life*) and the (non-Hollywood) films of Kurosawa, especially *Dodeska'den*. □

FOOTNOTES

1. Lucy Fisher, a former Zoetrope executive, as cited in an interview in *American Film*, Oct. 1981, p. xx.
2. See Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986) pp. 182-188.
3. Jean Laplanche and J-B. Pontalis, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 49 (1968), p. 9.
4. Ibid. p. 11.
5. On this issue, see Elizabeth Cowie's "Fantasia," *m/f* (1984), pp. 70-105. She applies Laplanche and Pontalis' notions of fantasy 'as the mise-en-scene of desire' to film, and gives readings of *Now, Voyager* and *The Reckless Moment* in the light of their work.
6. Diana Leonard, *Sex and Generation* (1980), p. 84.
7. Bernice Martin, in an interview with Robert Fulford for "Realities," Ontario Educational Television, 1987.
8. Unlike classic melodramas like *Casablanca* and *There's Always Tomorrow*, there is no tragic renunciation or sense of loss at the end of the film with the break-up of either Franny and Ray or Hank and Leila. Ray and Leila merely disappear from the narrative.
9. Another film which is fascinatingly close to *One From The Heart* in theme is Chantal Akerman's *The Golden Eighties* (1986). It is a musical in the conventional sense—the actors sing and dance—but it too up-ends common conventions of Romance. At the end of the film, the audience is informed that the passionate love affair between Lily and Robert will last only a few months, and the love-sick heroine will presently find someone else to fill Robert's place in her heart. Its locale is a shopping mall, apparently the French equivalent for Las Vegas as a metaphor for desire.
10. Robin Wood, *Ibid*, p. 3.

Biology and Ideology: The 'Natural' Family in *Paris, Texas*

by Mas'ud Zavarzadeh

THE HISTORICAL FUNCTION OF MANY OF THE institutions of contemporary bourgeois life such as the nuclear family and monogamous heterosexual marriage is put in question by the cultural contradictions of postmodern society. However, the prevailing ideologies of contemporary culture that support and legitimate the dominant social order are produced and circulated through these institutions. It is therefore politically necessary for the continuation of the existing socioeconomic relations to preserve and prolong these institutions and the values they engender. One of the most ideologically effective of these moves to prolong the life of bourgeois institutions has been to deny that they have been historically formed in response to certain socioeconomic demands that, judging by the crisis these institutions are now facing, may no longer obtain.

By denying their historicity, these institutions are represented as "natural," universal phenomena beyond the constraints of any particular historical moment and thus "eternal." Presenting "family" or "marriage," for instance, as "natural" provides the "commonsense" logic of culture with a way of explaining away the crisis that faces these institutions at the present moment. If the institutions of bourgeois life can be proven to be natural and thus universal and eternal, then the ills that have befallen them in postmodern culture are easily demonstrated to be matters of "accident" and not the "essence" of the institutions themselves. By naturalizing social organizations such as family and separating their "essence" from the circumstantial "accidents" affecting them, the dominant ideology privatizes the problems facing marriage, family and parenthood as the failures of individuals. In doing so it demonstrates that these institutions of middle class life are in good shape and far from breaking down, saving them from the pressures of a sustained interrogation and enabling the continued mystification of their practices in contemporary thought.

Wim Wenders' film, *Paris, Texas*, is an exemplary instance of such mystification of the postmodern bourgeois family. The film's ideological purpose is to demonstrate that the seeming crisis that has affected the family and problematized all kinship ties is indeed engendered by individuals and their private problems while the family as an institution not only remains intact but continues to provide the ultimate grounds for living. Wenders' project is carried out in terms of a close study of the families of two brothers (Walt and Travis) whose five members are portrayed in a home movie. The home movie is shown at a strategic point when the first "quest" of the film—retrieving Travis from the wilderness—is completed and before, as Wenders himself puts it, "the movie turns and starts walking on a new territory" ("Wim Wenders: An interview," *Film Quarterly*, Winter 1984-85). The "new territory" is, of course, the film's second "quest" in which Travis' wife Jane is

retrieved from the Keyhole Club, a peepshow palace in Houston. It is true that the home movie within *Paris, Texas* echoes Wenders' interest in metafilm and in the question of filmic reflexivity in general, but the home movie here has a specific function beyond its speculative dimension about the nature of filmic production. Its function is to record in an honest and truthful manner the life of the two families together before crisis hits one of them. As a "home movie" it is honest in that it is un-made, unadorned and above all silent, which is to say it is, like Travis, "mute" and, in Wenders' vocabulary, signals "authenticity" and the "veracity" of experience. The home movie is a "document" of connection, human togetherness and above all family happiness. This sense of family happiness as recorded in the home movie becomes the implicit standard of human happiness against which all human experiences in the film are measured.

The home movie portrays Walt and his wife Anne, who is French, and Travis and his wife Jane, and their son, Hunter. It is shot during a vacation and is the only vivid sign that Hunter has of his mother, who has since abandoned him. The happiness recorded in the home movie ended when Travis suddenly disappeared and Jane left Hunter with Walt and Anne who have raised him as their own child. Travis' mysterious disappearance is the ostensible cause of the breakdown of his family, but, later in the film, it is explained in terms of his own private emotional problems. He is unable to deal with the complexities of life including living with another person, Jane. For him Jane is the site of otherness: he neither understands her nor is able to accept his lack of understanding of her utter difference as part of the problematics of human communication. In order to feel related to Jane he must turn her otherness into his own sameness and to achieve this goal he resorts to emotional and physical violence.

During the early stages of his marriage to Jane he is happy. But he becomes more and more dependent on her, and although he describes this dependency as the sign of their utmost happiness together since they cannot leave each other even for a short period of time, the film constructs his dependency as a mark of his deep-rooted troubles. He becomes so in need of Jane for his emotional sustenance that he gives up his job so that he can stay at home with her all day. After a while, in order to support her, he has to go back to work again, but this time while he is at work all day his mind is on Jane wondering whether she is spending her day with another man. Coming home he is angry and unleashes his violence on her. Travis lives with the constant fear that Jane may run away; it is this fear that makes him tie a bell around her ankle so that if she tries to leave in the night, he will hear the bell. The entire sequence of Travis' actions involving Jane has echoes of psychopathologic behaviour, and his account of this period of his life with Jane ends with an engulfing fire that almost kills him. One night he gets up to find that Jane, who always dreamed of running away, has left with Hunter, and that flames are consuming his clothes. He manages to escape the fire, but once



Paris, Texas: Dean Stockwell brings home his recalcitrant brother.

outside his house he does not stop to look back. He continues to walk for several days, and it is this unbroken walk that begins his journey that ends, after four years, in the parched Texas desert—the opening scene of the film. The breakup of his family is thus directly linked to Travis' emotional problems and mental states; he is produced in the film as jealous, sexually insecure and intellectually incapable of dealing with such complexities as the opacity of another human being. He is possessive (the other side of his sexual insecurity and jealousy), sentimental (the underside of what he calls his love for Jane) and lacks the rigour and toughness of a grown man—which allows the film to represent him largely as a “child,” a child who for most of the film has to rely on his own child to orient himself in the world of adults.

The psychomythical dimension of childhood and its effects on the adult (a loosely Freudian model of the “family romance”) is elaborated in the film; in fact it forms one of the ideological strategies of the film for asserting the private nature of family crisis. It claims that the person involved precipitates the crisis because of his or her own childhood traumas. Travis, the film implies, has had a childhood of unsettled emotions. His father and his part-Spanish mother (another marker of otherness in the film) were never really visible to each other. His mother was a “plain” woman but his father (who like Travis was a complex of troubled dreams and visions) refused to see her as such. He saw her as a fancy woman from Paris, which turns out to be Paris, Texas, but his father, in introducing her or talking about her always drops his voice and eliminates Texas so that it is often misconstrued as Paris, France. Travis has heard from his father that his parents

conceived him in Paris, Texas, and as a way of finding a connection with his origins and holding on to a tangible link with his parents, Travis purchases a vacant lot in Paris, Texas, which is little more than sand and tumbleweed. The ideological point the film makes by foregrounding Travis' attachment to his past is that his troubles have deep roots in the dark recesses of his unconscious. By such emphasis on his private troubles, the film undermines the social side of the family crisis that Travis-Jane-Hunter are facing and accents Travis' own role as the troubled source of the crisis.

The film stresses this personalization of difficulties by representing them in Travis' physique: from the opening shot of *Paris, Texas*, he is seen as “different.” Wandering in the Texas desert he wears a white shirt and tie, a faded double-breasted jacket, a baseball cap and shoes so worn out nothing is left of them. It is not only the confused ensemble of his garments that places him in a different space from the norm. His face is that of the mentally lost: the lines of his face reflect the agonies of sleepless nights, and his eyes are those of someone intimate with alien realities.

Travis is not only responsible for the breakup of his family, but also for the plight of Jane. After he left, Jane also disappeared, ending up in a peepshow palace called the Keyhole Club in Houston, where lonely men talk to the women of their desires for a fee. The connection between the club's male patrons (one of whom is Travis) and the women is through a one-way mirror and a telephone, that is by means of words: a narcissistic relationship that was, the film implies, all Travis had with Jane at the beginning of their marriage and is now all he has with her at the end of his contact with her. Although



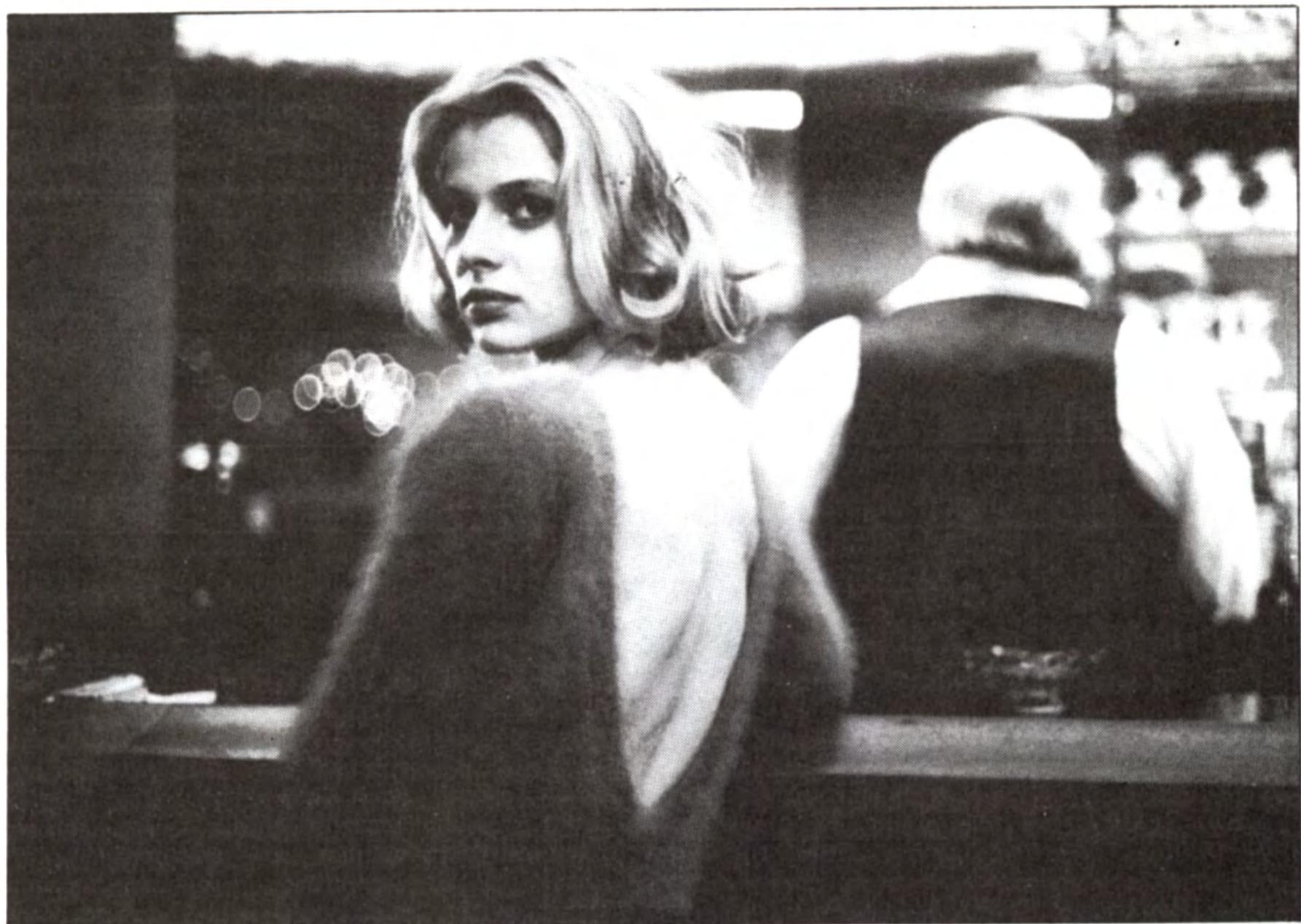
Paris, Texas: Travis is welcomed 'home'.

Jane, like Travis, has left her son, Hunter, unlike Travis she has not forsaken him; every month out of her meagre income she has sent some money for Hunter. While the neurotic Travis is self-mesmerized and can only think in terms of himself, Jane is constantly worried about their child. Although she finds any knowledge of him too painful to bear, there is an unbreakable blood relationship between her and Hunter.

It is exactly this lack of blood relationship that marks the otherwise completely comfortable and almost luxurious life Hunter is living with Anne and Walt who provide him with the entire range of contemporary "kid culture" available. He not only owns an impressive array of electronic gadgets, but, most important, he is fully immersed in the discourses of culture. He speaks a language that is a tissue of references to space technology, astronomy and science fiction. While Travis is a complete alien to this culture, Walt is quite comfortable with it. In fact Walt owns a company that erects billboards all over Los Angeles to make the discourse of consumer culture available to everyone. Hunter has no visible problem communicating with Walt, and Anne is the embodiment of an unconditional love for Hunter. She is so close to Hunter and so attuned to his emotions that she cannot imagine a life without him. When Travis is found in the Texas desert and brought home by Walt, Anne senses that the end of her "motherhood" is close at hand and realizes that the arrival of Travis signals the termination of her own "family." First she tries to discourage Walt from the "business" of pushing Hunter and Travis together. When Walt violently objects, reminding her that they *are* already together by virtue of their blood relationship, Anne resorts to the last device left to her. She reveals to Travis that Jane sends a nominal sum of money for Hunter every month and that she had the money traced to a bank in Houston. She hopes Travis

will go in search of Jane and leave Hunter alone. Travis does leave to find Jane but takes Hunter with him.

After his arrival, Travis attempts to open direct communication with his son but fails at first. There is a sharp conflict of discourses here. For instance, he does not own a car ("nobody walks anymore," Hunter tells Anne in response to her urging him to walk home from school with Travis); he is not dressed "properly" (that is in the attire of a successful professional), and he does not speak the contemporary language of a consumer culture. In fact the first day that Travis appears at the school to walk home with Hunter, Hunter is so embarrassed that he hides and rides home in a neighbor's car. Later that evening Walt finds Hunter in the garage sitting behind the wheel of his car "driving"—thus signaling his utter discursive difference from his "natural" father. The second time—after Travis has familiarized himself with the discourse of fatherhood by wearing a three-piece suit picked out with the help of Walt and Anne's Spanish maid who symbolically becomes his "nanny," helping him to grow up into the codes of culture—Hunter walks home with him, but allegorically, for two-thirds of the way home, they walk on opposite sides of the street. The third time Travis appears at the school, he is more at home with the discourses of paternity and the culture; he is even driving an old battered pickup truck. Thus when he informs Hunter that he is about to leave in search of Jane, Hunter decides to go with him. The three meetings between father and son show the decreasing distance between them, but the discursive gap remains more or less the same. They rarely talk to each other directly, and it is interesting to note that when they are driving in the pickup truck, we often see Hunter sitting in the open back talking through a walkie-talkie to his father who remains inside the cab.



Hunter's decision to leave his life with Anne and Walt and go with Travis with whom he cannot communicate most of the time is "explained" in the (ideo)logic of the film as a mark of his instinctual pull towards his "real" (i.e. biological) parents. Although he has grown up with Walt and Anne and has spent four out of eight years of his life with them and despite the fact that the discourses of the culture he is familiar with are utterly alien to his father, he "knows" that he should be with him. This assertion of the priority of blood relationships over discursive relationships in the film is of primary significance and has deep social and political implications. The film sets up two kinds of families: a) the natural family based on blood ties and b) what might be called a "discursive family" whose members do not have biological ties but share in the common codes of culture. The film privileges the biological family and thus reifies the traditional bourgeois family as the very grounds of a person's existence. It is through such privileging that *Paris, Texas* reconfirms the "values" that bourgeois culture derives from the family: the idea of the "individual" as a unitary person whose wholeness and totality is provided through the cohesion created by uncontested connections with the family as well as the notions of paternity and maternity through which the male is constructed as the dominant and the female as the subordinate figures. But the most significant idea extracted from the reification of the traditional family is the notion of authority. The biological family implies that it is "natural" for the father to be the dominant figure and for the mother and children, in varying degrees, to be subjects (of his desire and command). In the same way that one cannot break a (natural) family tie, one cannot avoid its dictates which are all based on the notion of the authority of the father. The natural family then is an ideological space in which the underlying abstract hierarchy of a patriarchal society is translated into everyday practices. It is a closed entity placed outside history. The "discursive family," on the other hand, is not "eternally" bound, and as such it is a free congregation of people who are joined together by a set of codes, and if those codes change their relationship will change. Such an open space is inherently unstable and threatening since it constantly reorganizes itself through its codes, and codes, unlike genes, are transformable and changing.

Paris, Texas then, by having Hunter leave his discursive family as unsatisfactory and join his natural father, reinstates the codes of patriarchy which were bracketed for Hunter while Travis was away. In rejecting the "artificial" discursive family, here represented by Walt and Anne, the film implicitly rejects all family organization based on shared codes rather than genes, and Wenders' target of attack is ultimately the socialist idea of family. The socialist model of the family, which like Anne-Walt-Hunter is based on a set of shared (and thus changeable) codes, is the most frightening challenge to the bourgeois sense of selfhood, parenthood, authority and of course private property, which is transmitted through true natural heirs. To emphasize the alienness of such a concept of parenthood, the film represents the "mother" of the discursive family in the film (Anne) as an "alien," a Frenchwoman who cannot even speak English without an accent. The fact that Hunter confesses that he has no clear and vivid image of Jane except the one seen in the home movie, however, reveals, despite the film's purpose, that "distance," "otherness" and "alienness" are conditions of possibility of the natural family as much as they are, supposedly, the enabling conditions of the discursive and artificial family.

OPPOSITE: Above—**Paris, Texas:** Nastassja Kinski in the bar/peepshow palace. Below—**Paris, Texas:** Harry Dean Stanton in the desert.

ENROUTE TO TEXAS IN SEARCH OF JANE, father and son have a grand time together: they are engaged in an incessant set of games, and the trip becomes a timeless blot in which the two recapture the innocence of childhood. Hunter is away from the surveillance of Anne, the school and other social agencies while Travis in his truck has a domain of his own. Father and son (members of the biological family) are immediately available to each other—the two know each other although they do not fully understand each other, and the notion of "parenthood" as a mode of plenitude, presence and transcendental knowing is strongly developed by the film.

After locating Jane in the peepshow palace, Travis cannot talk to her at first. Looking at her through a one-way mirror, he breaks down and leaves his booth abruptly. In his second visit to the place, Travis manages to tell Jane, again through the telephone and one-way mirror, the allegory of his life: the loving but self-destructive husband whose emotional knots break up his family. Travis' project in finding Jane is, of course, to bring Hunter and Jane together because it is the relationship between mother and child that according to him is the most authentic form of connection. The child comes from the body of the mother and as such the connection between the two is the most "natural" and unconstrained by the codes of affection that culture imposes upon other modes of relating. Through privileging the body/blood relationship between mother and child, Travis justifies his own action in taking Hunter from his adoptive mother and reuniting him with his biological mother. It is also his belief in the body connection that finally explains not just the title of the film but also Travis' almost mystical act of purchasing a piece of land in Paris, Texas. It is to own the place of his conception, to go beyond the ritual of parenting to the locus of the act of begetting himself that Travis buys the land. There is, obviously, a close connection between Travis' view of the body (the site of genuine affection) and the land itself since the land—especially the wide open desert spaces of Texas not yet tamed by culture—like the body is truthful; it lies beyond and under all the surface changes (of culture) and remains literally the final ground of all modes of living. The conjuncture between body and land in *Paris, Texas* is what gives meaning to the obscure picture of the vacant lot he always carries with him. The significance of the picture is not clear to others: Walt almost ridicules him for buying a vacant lot, and Hunter teases Travis about his dream place since going to *Paris, Texas* can only mean "living on dirt" to the sophisticated boy raised by Anne and Walt.

Travis' act of reuniting Jane and Hunter is a symbolic reinscription of patriarchy in culture—the natural family is back together, and the values of family life are reaffirmed. Fullness is returned to family life in the same manner that Travis achieves wholeness of self by purchasing the lot in *Paris, Texas*. This completeness of self is "expressed" through the language of silence—silence being the mark of the authentic subject in the film. Thus when leaving Hunter, Travis says his farewells in a tape-recorded message since he cannot use the language of direct communication between father and son. The taped message is once more a sign of his cultural inability; it is a form of muteness and thus conveys the veracity of his emotions. His "muteness" in this section of the film draws upon the ideological investments made in the sign of "muteness" in the first part of the film. In a sense the entire film is framed by these two moments of "non-talking": between his waking up, after a heat stroke, in a clinic in the Texas desert and his leaving the hotel after having made a taped message for Hunter. The "talking" that takes place between these two

moments of muteness and silence is nothing more than cultural bubble-talk of the mundane and the quotidian.

Critics, who have regarded the film as being split between a "hugely portentous opening" of mythic dimensions with "desert, vultures, dogged muteness and an attempt to flee back to the desert," and a rather disappointing and empty second part which is hardly more than a "tiny domestic drama" that no television producer would accept, miss the typological nature of the film's structure. Elements of the second part of the film assume their significance only by reference to points established in the first part: the first part of the film is not a literal "exposition" and "preparation" for the second part but a matrix of signifiers that are the enabling conditions of the "meanings" of the signifieds of the second part. The taped message that Travis leaves for Hunter is clear enough on its own terms only if one is interested in the "informational" content of the message. But without locating the taping of the message in the general set of signifiers of "muteness" that are elaborated and developed in the first part, the ideological investments of the film remain unclear. The film is a statement about the "natural" status of the family and represents the "natural" as a state of existence that is understandable without any mediation of language, culture or other forms of textuality. It is as available, real, concrete and obvious as the desert in which Travis was found wandering. "Muteness" is part of the transgression of cultural boundaries and their linguistic codes, and it is seminal to the reinscription of the natural in the general ideological climate of the film.

In fact the entire film is made, according to Wim Wenders, as an act of asserting the "natural" and the uncontested real which lies beyond all modes of textualities and mediation. In the *Film Quarterly* interview, he elaborates his views on the subject of the "real" as it relates to the act of filmmaking, and since what he says about the art of filmmaking is directly related to the ideological pressures in *Paris, Texas*, it is necessary to quote him at some length:

I've made quite a number of films that were more concerned with reflecting themselves than reflecting anything that exists apart from movies. And you can call that life, or truth, or whatever. Reality. Doesn't matter. I mean, all those forbidden words. And I see lots of movies and was getting frustrated not only by my own work and the reflexiveness of it but with other movies, too, because it seemed there was no more way out. Whatever film you went to see, it had its nourishment or its life or its food, its roots, in other movies. In movies. I didn't see anything anymore that was really trying to redefine a relation between life and images made from life. Whatever you go to see these days, you sit there and after some time you realize that you're involved again in something that was born and has been recapitulating an experience that comes from other movies. And I think that's a really serious dead end for something that I love very much, which is movies. And I did my share of that. *Paris, Texas* was—I wouldn't say desperate, because I wasn't so desperate while I was making it—but at the end of *The State of Things*, there was no other choice than to redefine, or find again, or rediscover what this is: to film something that exists, and film something that exists quite apart from movies.

"Muteness" in Wenders' new cinematography is the sign of this possibility of breaking through the intervening systems of signification—stopping the language whose signifiers constantly refer to other signifiers rather than a "real" which is located uncontestedly beyond them—and reaching the state of the real, the natural. Talk is un-natural; it is the work of culture. Muteness is natural; it is an anti-language that blankets the bubble of culture and attains the purity of plenitude and self-presence.

It is in fact in absolute "muteness" that Jane and Hunter first encounter each other in the hotel. There is nothing said

between them except the caresses and spinning embrace Jane gives Hunter. While the bodily relationship (mother and son) is resurrected, Travis, who is looking up at the hotel room from the parking lot, leaves once again to disappear into the muteness of the lands that lie beyond the skyscrapers of Houston.

Travis' self-effacement in bringing mother and son together, like his muteness, is typologically anticipated in the first part of the film. In that section of the film, Walt selflessly goes to Texas to bring his brother back in spite of all the difficulties he encounters (Travis' silence, his refusal to leave the ground and fly to LA, his attempts to return to the desert). Walt's devotion to the idea of family—recovering his "natural" brother and reuniting him with his "natural" son, Hunter—as the basis of human connection is reasserted in the ending. The film's ideological move to "prove" that family is the uncontested "natural" ground of community and living comes to a rest with Travis' bringing together mother and son—something that, the film implies, he himself never had and whose lack is behind the failure as a father. His leaving the scene eliminates the element of crisis that the family has been facing, and his absence thus assures the continuation of the natural course of living in the family. □



Wim Wenders

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POWER & THE MASQUERADE: The Devil Is a Woman

by Florence Jacobowitz

THE collaborative works of Josef Von Sternberg and Marlene Dietrich seem to provide a disparate group of critics with an endless source of material for re-evaluation. *Blonde Venus* in particular, but also *The Scarlet Empress*, *Morocco* and *Shanghai Express* are especially popular choices and deservedly so. The films' narrative and formal complexities, intricate as the layers of lace and netting which weave through the *mise-en-scène*, invite multiple readings and interpretations. Although the films were produced in the '30s, they resonate still with a progressive, even radical modernity in terms of aesthetics and politics, which makes the impoverished output of cinematic 'art' in the '80s seem all the more meagre. Of all the Dietrich/Sternberg films, their last collaboration, *The Devil Is A Woman* (1935), has been most ignored. (As Pasqual and Concha forecast in the film, "I have read the reviews . . ." "The critics don't value genius.") A box-office failure upon its release, it remains the least accessible of all their films. This cannot be attributed simply to subject matter; Pierre Louys' novel, *The Woman and the Puppet*, upon which the film is based, has been adapted for the cinema (at least) four times throughout the century. The first version was a silent film, circa 1920 (the exact title is unknown to me), followed by Sternberg's 1935 version originally titled *Capriccio Espagnol* (more titillatingly renamed and released, against the director's wishes). Julien Duvivier remade the Louys novel in 1958 and Luis Bunuel's version, and last feature film, was released in 1977 entitled *That Obscure Object of Desire*.¹ The popularity of "Carmen" in all its manifestations is further evidence that the story of the respectable gentleman's repeatedly frustrated attempts to possess the seductive child/courtesan is, and always has been, extremely popular.

One can attribute some of the displeasure with *The Devil Is A Woman* to its extreme stylization. Although Sternberg's films are noted for their aesthetic and formal excesses, which never fail to foreground style as integral to signification, *The Devil Is A Woman* only vaguely conforms to familiar Realist modes of spectatorship. Instead, the film is almost Brechtian in its presentation of the narrative, acting and dialogue. This is achieved through heightening effects which insist upon critical distance, making the familiar strange and exaggerated. Dietrich's performance is 'acted' and 'spoken.' Although set in Spain, the film makes no effort to conform to place or time: consider the unlikely casting of Edward Everett Horton as the Spanish governor, Paquito, or Alison Skipworth as Senora Perez. Much of the film's humour derives from the double perspective it offers—that of Pasqual's 'story' to Antonio, and the film's perspective which often differs from that of the male protagonist. Concha's letter-writing sequence, which Pasqual could not have witnessed, is one example. Concha dictates her letter facing the camera, dry-eyed and without a note of regret: "I am deeply offended. I never want to see you again. And my mother doesn't want to see you again. [pause] As I write this my heart is bleeding . . . and my eyes are filled with tears . . ."

Susan Sontag includes ". . . the outrageous aestheticism of Sternberg's six American movies with Dietrich, all six but

especially the last," in her "Notes on 'Camp'."² (I don't fully agree with all of her comments on 'camp,' particularly her claim that it is "depoliticized" and "apolitical." Perhaps one can't fully blame Sontag for ignoring the politics of sex and gender in 1964—however, it remains a problem in her later work as well. There is, nevertheless, much in her description which is appropriate to Sternberg's aesthetic.) ". . . The essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration."³ "Camp sees everything in quotation marks . . . It's not a woman, but a 'woman.' To perceive camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role."⁴ Because it "theatricalizes" experience, it "involves one through detachment."⁵ One can say that it distances the viewer by drawing attention to its artifice.

Although Sternberg often utilized expressive decor, sometimes under the guise of producing 'period pieces' (which tend to ignore any sense of historical accuracy) or of being necessary to exotic locales, *The Devil Is A Woman* is extreme in the manner in which it parades its stylization. Most of the film was shot on studio sets and little effort is made to disguise this. The characters wade through the *mise-en-scène* which is strewn with streamers, confetti, ribbons, and balloons. The theme of the carnival (and the 'carnivalesque') pervades the film well beyond the plot. Dietrich/Concha is over-elaborately costumed and made-up, and her acting style (prior to the final sequence) points to her performance and the manner in which feminine role-playing can be used to achieve personal needs and demands outside the 'feminine' domain. All the Sternberg/Dietrich films acknowledge and foreground the woman's position as spectacle-object, and the layers of masks and roles the female protagonist appropriates; however, *The Devil Is A Woman* takes this project as its thematic. By exaggerating feminine iconography and presenting it as such, Dietrich/Concha makes it noticeable. In fact, Sternberg utilizes the notion of masquerade, much in the same way as it has been recently 'rediscovered' by French feminists Julia Kristeva (borrowing from Mikhail Bakhtin), Luce Irigaray and feminist film theorists like Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane. Quoting from Joan Rivière's *Womanliness as a Masquerade: Psychoanalysis and Female Sexuality* (New Haven College and University Press, 1966), Doane describes masquerade as "an excess of femininity," of femininity "constructed as a mask." "The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. In this way the entire issue of female representation is foregrounded."⁶ Feminine imaging is exposed as a cultural construction, and not as an essence. *The Devil Is A Woman* establishes this thematic brilliantly the moment Concha is introduced; she is being drawn in a wagon, perched among balloons, elaborately masked and costumed—offered as a parade float, a pure spectacle to be looked at and enjoyed.

The film also works to expose the traditionally masculine narrative voice as well as masculine role-playing and iconography. Although Pasqual/Lionel Atwill narrates much of the opening movement as a series of memory flashbacks to Antonio/Cesar Romero, this narrative voice is countered by an arguably stronger one which empathizes with the female protagonist. Many critics have commented on the director's staging of an alter ego in the Lionel Atwill character. Much has been made of Atwill's physical and facial similarity to Sternberg (his moustache, his manner of dress) and of the fact that

OPPOSITE: Dietrich as Concha.

the Dietrich/Sternberg years of collaboration were at an end and their split not entirely amicable. Pasqual is notably the least stylized of all the characters, though not necessarily the most honest or empathetic: Is he warning Antonio/Cesar Romero of the 'evils' of women or hoping that he can protect and savour *his* love object? This level of director/character identification does not imply that the spectator's sympathies are with Pasqual against Concha. Sternberg may identify with Pasqual in terms of masculine experience, but his identification with the Dietrich character (as he once succinctly put it, "I am Marlene") is also evident, particularly towards the end. It is significant that in the film's closing images one is left alone with Concha and not with either Pasqual or Antonio. This undermines any assurance that Concha in fact returns to Pasqual.

Some of the obstacles the film sets up in terms of a simplified ideological reading of the narrative are linked to the manner in which one is invited to identify with Concha. Dietrich's characters often demand a different kind of spectatorial involvement. They aren't traditional psychologically rounded characters; in fact, their motivations are often opaque. One often does not know what she thinks yet one begins to empathize and identify with her position and her strategies for manoeuvring in a world with elaborate rules of gender behaviour for excluding women from assuming power or freedom. Sternberg's Concha is not a generously endowed child, but a mature, highly sexual woman who is neither particularly young nor virginal. Dietrich's Concha is complexly integrated with an already established persona which connotes an assertive sexual woman who refuses to be designated as either familial or masculine property. And although she is presented as a fantasy construct (a construct which she is complicit in maintaining), she is treated as a character in her own right and given her own 'voice.' Dietrich's 'numbers' are often more informative than her speech. The "Three Sweethearts" number flaunts Concha's transgression of patriarchal rules of ownership and monogamy ("To all three I'm true . . . and I can be as true to you"), while celebrating her sexuality and her freedom to choose her sexual partners. Concha is as aggressive, assertive and exploitative as the men who try to take advantage of her, wishing to exploit her body and being.

In fact, *The Devil Is A Woman* presents a severe critique of gender relations within a capitalist society and perhaps, for this reason, it is the least recuperable of all Sternberg/Dietrich films, hence the most ignored. Although one of Sternberg's greatest talents was his ability in passing sexual innuendo under the censor's nose, one marvels still at how *The Devil Is A Woman* got made. The film's subversive treatment of sexual politics is not in any sense a subtext, and retitling *Capriccio Espagnol* in no way alleviates its profound attack on social conceptions of gender. The film completely undermines what could easily be misconstrued as a mildly erotic misogynist tale of the pretty cockteaser who needs a good beating. Though Dietrich plays the sexually enticing femme fatale, Sternberg never resorts to a more 'respectable' Hays code ending, such as having Concha regret her past before being run over by the train at the end. Instead he chooses to vindicate the heroine without expiation. Given the restrictions of censorship, this interpretation of the Lóuys narrative ventures furthest in illustrating the manner in which masculine dominance is exercised in a capitalist society, overriding alternative expressions of sexuality and oppressing other classes through the manipulation of wealth and status.

Underlying the story of Don Pasqual's pursuit of the elusive object of desire is a story about the male protagonist's fear of losing a precariously constructed position of power

integral to survival in the dominant social system. The onus of bearing the 'phallus' and fulfilling the demands of the masculine position is, at times, overwhelming. The fears underlying gender difference—fears of impotence, powerlessness, death—are ever present, provoking ambivalent desires of pleasure and pain. Likewise, the empowered class is threatened by those who violate the rules of commodity exchange. Concha is a vivid manifestation of both these fears; she transgresses socially sanctioned laws regarding gender roles (her adamant refusal to be appropriated under any terms) and those related to class and capital (she uses Don Pasqual's money without abiding by capitalist rules of fair exchange). These fears surface when the male protagonist fails to possess/buy/control the sexual woman. As a result, the narrative identifies the assertion of female desire with the accompanying eruption of violence. Concha as the illicit sexual 'other' is at once attractive yet threatening as she signals the breakdown of law and order.

In "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema," Gaylyn Studlar presents a theory of the masochistic aesthetic challenging Laura Mulvey's thesis linking visual pleasure in narrative film to Oedipal-organized structures of voyeurism and sadism. Drawing from Deleuze, Studlar suggests that masochistic pleasure is centred on identification with or submission to the female, (who represents the pre-Oedipal oral mother's power of "plenitude" and "unity") and *not* dominance or control over the woman who threatens castration. Studlar traces this aesthetic in the Dietrich/Sternberg films, citing *The Devil Is A Woman* as an example. Don Pasqual's obvious pleasure in retelling his story of "waiting and suspended suffering" culminating in his near suicide, crystallizes the masochist's simultaneous desire to reunite submissively with the powerful mother and the painful fear of being abandoned by her.⁷ While I admire the theory (and lack the space and psychoanalytic expertise to articulate a lengthier response) I feel Studlar underplays the importance of domination and control to Don Pasqual, especially given the framework of violence and conflict within which the narrative is placed. The argument also very pointedly situates and essentializes the character's behaviour and by extension, spectatorial response, outside of any social or historical context. Sternberg's film precisely contextualizes Don Pasqual's desire to appropriate and own Concha within a social system inextricably bound up with various forms of masculine dominance.

The opening of *The Devil Is A Woman* vividly illustrates the social climate integral to Concha/Pasqual's story. The opening images frame the potential eruption of sexuality and lawlessness epitomized in the week of carnival, with the reminder that it is *sanctioned* by the ruling authoritarian regime. Although the carnival has recently been theorized as a liminal state which can threaten the oppressive dominant government, the film immediately reminds one that the rebellious tendencies carnival inspires are inseparably linked to the maintenance of the status quo. In fact, the traditional religious roots of the carnival reflect this: it is a forum for the release of usually prohibited physical pleasure prior to the penance and deprivation of Lent (enjoy now, repent later). The opening image is of a procession of the governor followed by the army/police emerging from a darkened archway, proceeding directly towards the camera (and audience). The all-male mounted army visually positioned as an erect phallus suggests both the potential release of sexuality and impotence resulting from forces of repression at the hand of the state, empowered

OPPOSITE: Above—Final scene: Concha and the coachman. Below—Concha and the wounded Don Pasqual.



with the authoritarian strength of its own law. The image of the vacillating phallus is reinforced through the comic routine Paquito the governor enacts with his subservient side-kick, involving his walking stick and umbrella—the governor decides when the umbrella may be opened and shut, depending on the rain or lack of it. Paquito reinforces his authority over the people's pleasure by informing the police: "Tomorrow the carnival begins . . . Every crook and political offender will try to take advantage of the masquerade. I want no useless arrests. I do not want any interference with the people's pleasures. If anyone contradicts—shoot'em!"

Under a state of prolonged repression, the temporary reversals and limited transgressions released during carnival result in violent, aggressive behaviour and manifest elements of the grotesque. The images of the carnival introduce this theme through the *mise-en-scène*. Following Paquito's orders, a group of policeman are seen enmeshed in a circle of streamers and dancers, followed by an image wherein a larger-than-life rooster ('cock') is also caught in the midst of a circle of women. At this point the masked image of Antonio is introduced, followed by a shot of a person dressed as a bull being teased, then cutting back to Antonio. Besides the little joke of inserting Antonio between the 'cock' and the 'bull,' the film aligns him with images of machismo—the police, the rooster, the bull being teased, encircled and overpowered by a crowd prominently peopled with women. These few shots succinctly establish two important themes that will be followed through the film: 1) The film's visual emphasis on masks, veils, costumes which immediately raises the question of identities and roles becoming interchanged and threatened, and the fact that nothing is quite what it seems. Gender roles are being reversed, people are dressed as animals or are decorated with oversized appendages, Antonio, the principal character of interest, is masked, and everything is chaotic and in a tumult. 2) The first hints of aggression are introduced as various images of 'masculinity' are being threatened and sexually teased. (This marks an additional reversal—the 'hunter' has become the 'hunted,' dominated, for once, by women). The following shots confirm both of these themes. Antonio's mask obscures the upper part of his face, but isolates his roving eyes avidly searching the crowd for pretty women. He approaches a street vendor who is wearing an overgrown phallic nose, and asks him where the ladies are. The vendor whistles and a fat woman (a grotesque, inverse parody of the desirable object) appears on a veranda which is decorated with balloons. Antonio's first move is an aggressive one—he shoots and bursts the balloons around the woman. At this point Concha is introduced as a parade float, extravagantly costumed, surrounded by balloons. Antonio proceeds to attract her attention by bursting several balloons with his sling shot; his manner of sexual contact is 'playfully' violent. The 'shots' will continue and become more serious, when Don Pasqual later displays his shooting prowess by shooting out the Queen's heart in Concha's card, and finally when both men plan to shoot-to-kill in the duel.

As in much of Sternberg's work, the *mise-en-scène* is overwhelmingly filled with visual metaphors that suggest male/female sexuality (or parody heterosexual stereotypes of male/female sexual roles in terms of active/passive, subject/object, pursuer/pursued). Sticks, umbrellas, sling-shots, guns, cigarettes are linked with the male protagonists, often suggesting sexual frustration, phallus substitutes, loaded or erect, yet impotent, while streamers and balloons are linked to women (the latter perhaps reminiscent of the American male's breast fetish). One can compare this to the bell/candle (womb/phallus) metaphors in *The Scarlet Empress*. Concha's transgressions are underlined visually by her appropriation of male

iconography—the walking stick, the umbrella, the cigarette. Between these metaphors of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' exists a third that, in a sense, ambiguously combines both: the puppet on a string, the jack-in-the-box, the balloon of a head atop a coiled neck, the goose in the basket—images where both elements are in conflict. These images litter the opening carnival scene, described by Louys, appropriately enough, as a "battle."

Antonio is introduced roaming the streets, searching for an object to satisfy his desire, and Concha is initially introduced as the supreme object on display. But an inversion takes place which denies this simple reading. Sternberg allows the spectator an insight into Concha to which both the masked Antonio and Pasqual are blind. As Concha (the hunted) has signalled *her* pleasure with Antonio by returning the look, the 'hunter' attempts to come forward and claim his catch. The spectator is then treated to a high angle, point-of-view shot from Concha's vantage point. We see Antonio foolishly tangled in the encircling crowd and the streamers. The next shot is a reaction shot of Concha laughing at the dashing but impotent, bemasked caballero, reduced to a point of comic helplessness, much like the policemen, the rooster and the bull in earlier shots. The shot of Antonio, caught like a puppet on a string, aligns him with Pasqual who later narrates his story while toying with a male puppet doll, with limbs attached to strings, dressed like Pasqual, in the same top hat and suit. This image is reinforced in the last shot of the sequence; the scene fades out on a shot of a huge jack-in-the-box balloon (male head atop a long coiled neck), bobbing in the crowd, and fades back in on Antonio, pursuing Concha through streets littered with streamers and balloons. Antonio's naivety (his vision is indeed masked) is emphasized when he asks for the "lady" of the house and doesn't comprehend the doorman's reply, "Which one?" Like Pasqual, he only sees what he imagines—a rich, beautiful, enigmatic woman instead of a courtesan. Antonio the hunter is abruptly reminded that it is Concha who controls the situation. She informs him where she will later be riding through a note tucked inside another jack-in-the-box. Unlike Antonio, the audience realizes that the puppet caricature of a man's head on a long coiled neck stuffed in a box satirizes Antonio's entrapment in his delusions of power in relation to (to quote Antonio) the "gentler" sex. Concha appropriates this power (visually emphasized through her continual cigarette smoking) without sacrificing her sexual pleasures or her desires and will inversely treat the men in her life as objects for pleasure or capital gain.

The images of both Don Pasqual and Antonio as puppets being manipulated by Concha does not attest to Concha's ruthlessness as much as it points to the fact that both men, and Pasqual in particular, invite this treatment through their own self-centred blindness and obsessions. Both men are desirous of Concha's open sexuality, yet they are disappointed increasingly with her unwillingness to fulfill their fantasy image of femininity, and by their inability to dominate and regulate her. This is not as evident in Pasqual's narration of events as it is in Sternberg's presentation of the male narrating voice. Sternberg foregrounds the tenuousness of this voice and undercuts the spectator's commitment to Pasqual's view through the *mise-en-scène*, which tells its own story and at times contradicts Pasqual's. The motif of the jack-in-the-box, for example, appears in the opening sequence with Antonio, and in Pasqual's first flashback. He recalls how he forcibly held Concha

OPPOSITE: The Devil Is a Woman: Lionel Atwill, Marlene Dietrich.



back from fighting with a gypsy, and how she enjoyed it. Yet very evident in the *mise-en-scène* is a goose's head and long neck protruding out of a basket which Concha holds, directly beneath Pasqual. This element in the narrative tells the viewer that the apparent authority figure, Pasqual (like Antonio in the previous scene), is, in fact, trapped and will be controlled by Concha. The image also expresses Concha's viewpoint; he, like the goose, represents a source of income, tomorrow night's dinner.

Don Pasqual and Antonio are rivals for the possession of Concha Perez, 'the toast of Spain,' and, from the start, are set up as parallels and opponents. They enact the primal Oedipal rite wherein the father warns the son to stay away from 'mother,' whom he alone wishes to possess. The supposed 'love' each man feels is, more accurately, a desire to assert power to possess and win Concha. As a member of the working class, Concha is readily exploitable—she is an object of exchange in the open market and should be bought relatively cheaply. However, Concha increases her 'value' through denial (she becomes a difficult commodity to attain, and she is coveted by many). Sternberg foregrounds the male view of Concha as a commodity of pleasure from the start. The first act of exchange Pasqual attempts occurs during their first meeting. As a figure of authority (army/police) he restrains Concha on the train, and judges her to be a poor, innocent, 'lower-class' girl. Pasqual boldly asks her sexual favours, masked in 'proper' verbiage; he wonders if he might 'visit' her. Concha openly replies, "What do you take me for? Mother says no flies enter a closed mouth." If Concha were a member of his class, Pasqual would hesitate to venture the proposal. Concha is insulted by the suggestion and firmly dismisses him.

The sequence that follows in the cigarette factory consolidates the link between the exploitation of women and class exploitation, inherent in the system at large. "As the devil would have it," Pasqual begins, "I was investigating labour petitions in a cigarette factory." The investigating committee of ruling class males is visualized literally descending into the pit of factory workers, entirely composed of women. The slow tracking camera carefully examines the decor, testifying to the crowded, squalid working conditions. As the men step down into the factory, they pass wicker baskets, makeshift cradles, and cages suspended in the air, alternately filled with babies or birds. The scene visually negates the owner who is trying to assure the men, "Now gentlemen—you've heard stories which are not true . . . The girls are well-behaved and wouldn't exchange anything . . ." at which point he halts because someone has shot something into his eye. The tour continues with one man asking "Do the girls make the shipping cases too? Oh . . ." Although treated comically, the sequence links the treatment of women as oppressed workers to their treatment as sexual commodities. Like Antonio, Don Pasqual checks over the 'merchandise,' openly looking for a pretty woman, and spots Concha. He ironically asks her, "I suppose you make quite a lot of money," and she answers, equally ironically, "I have to work all week to bring flowers to my mother on Sunday." Pasqual proceeds with the ritual and gives Concha a gold piece and condescendingly asks, "Do you know what this is?" "Oh yes," she answers, "that's gold. More than I can earn in a year." Once again, 'courtship' (i.e. shopping for sex) is enacted through exchange. After paying, Pasqual demands his purchase. "Give me a cigarette rolled in those pretty hands." (This is clearer in Louy's version. There, Mateo asks for 'two *lovers* rolled in those pretty hands.') Pasqual is confident in his position of power because he knows that the drop of a coin, meaningless to him, means everything to Concha as it buys her freedom. However, again an inversion takes place and the close-up of the strategically placed

cigarette in Concha's mouth, coupled with her knowing smile, suggests her own powers. "Better take two, in case you become impatient." She knows she is being exploited but she will lead Pasqual to 'mother' who is even more adept at exploitation.

As Concha leads Pasqual up the long staircase to her home, the *mise-en-scène*, coupled with Concha's ironic responses, usurps the narrative voice from Don Pasqual and presents a dislocated point of view which comments on the version offered by the narrating protagonist. The movement up the stairs, a continuation of the ascent out of the cigarette factory, alludes to what follows: Concha's plan that she and her mother can counter-exploit and use their relationship with Don Pasqual to better their comforts in the material world. "How does your mother get up here?" Don Pasqual asks: "Oh, Mother can climb anything!" As Concha enters the apartment she calls out, "Look, Mother, I caught a fish," obviously alluding to Pasqual (previously visually paralleled with the goose in the basket). The allusion, ignored by Pasqual, is confirmed by Mother's response, "How will you ever feed it?", referring to the tiny gold-fish Concha is carrying. When Mother asks Concha how she could have earned the gold coin, she retorts, "I earn anything? Don't be silly, mother . . ."—a remark which confirms her refusal to participate in the system of exchange. Again the camera interrupts Pasqual's story by following Concha across the room to the birdcage and she motions to Morenito (who one assumes is her lover) to leave. Pasqual, committed to maintaining his illusions, denies the obvious and accepts that Morenito is a cousin. As the young man exits, he purposely blows smoke in Pasqual's face and the latter does not react. Although a very brief moment in the film, the insult emphasizes the extent to which Don Pasqual is steeped in his fantasy of acquisition as he awaits the goods. The moment is repeated later in a scene in Concha's nightclub which parallels the scene in Mother's apartment. (Both situations are, in many ways, identical—Concha's mother and the one-eyed club owner both depend upon Concha as a source of income and both welcome Pasqual to their respective houses. Pasqual must pay Mother to keep Concha out of the factory, and pays the club owner to relinquish Concha from contractual duties.) As Pasqual follows Concha to her dressing room, a man dressed in Turkish garb, standing outside the door, purposely blows smoke in Pasqual's face. Pasqual's only comment is that he should have changed into civilian clothes before coming. Pasqual understands that the insult is deserved as he has broken codes of his class (emblemized in his uniform) by *openly* courting a 'lower-class' dancer/courtesan while dressed as an officer.

Concha exploits Pasqual's persistence by using the money he offers without any intention of exchanging herself in the transaction, thus flagrantly transgressing the basic rule of capitalist law—one should get what one pays for. Yet Concha has very openly rejected participation in this system from the very first meeting on the train. When Pasqual offers Mother a large sum of money to 'buy' Concha in exchange for his 'care,' she accepts the monetary gift and leaves town. When Concha returns she openly informs him that all the money is gone and "I wouldn't have come except Mother needs more money." Again Pasqual proposes a transaction. He offers respectability through marriage. "No one will speak ill of you," he argues, and Concha counters, "No one speaks ill of me now." Pasqual's "no one" refers to the members of his class i.e. 'respectable' society. He displaces his own fears on to Concha; the comment more correctly reads "No one will speak ill of me . . ." It is, in fact, Don Pasqual who is risking embarrassment by openly pursuing Concha (as already evidenced repeatedly by Morenito's and the Turk's gestures of disdain). She, again,

refuses to be purchased and mocks the proposed transaction by insisting "You're not helping me . . . if you want to help mother that's your affair."

Concha's next appearance in Pasqual's life—her singing performance—sums up what she has promised all along. Her song parodies Pasqual's rites of bourgeois courtship (i.e. acquisition and ownership). Surrounded by grotesque exaggerations of courting lovers, she sings:

I'm a romantic, so romantic, that I often wish I had a more discreet heart. But believe me—please believe me—when I tell you I haven't got a sweetheart. (Chorus: Did I hear you say that you have none?). No, I only said I haven't *one*!

The second verse explains her position: "Three sweethearts have I . . .". The song intimates that each gives her sexual pleasure (one is decorated with a phallic nose): "He gives me . . . and other things that are so good," and ends with her declaration "To all three I'm true . . . and I could be as true to you." As Concha, again, climbs upstairs, to the roaring applause from the crowd of men, she approaches Pasqual's 'box,' removes the 'erect' cigarette from his mouth (lit during her performance) and puts it into hers. The gesture summarizes her song—Concha is independent and comfortable with her sexuality, and her body is her own to control, enjoy and share with whom she pleases. She will never sell or exchange herself for money or security, however she will use men to rise up in the world, just as they try to use her for their pleasure.

The cigarette-passing gesture, initiated in the tobacco factory ("Give me a cigarette rolled in those pretty little hands"), originally indicative of the usual exchange of sexual pleasure for money, has by now been openly deflated and reversed. Pasqual is incensed by Concha's inability to learn the rules of sexual commodification ("You played with me like a fool. What I gave gladly you took like a thief"), yet remains entrapped and unwilling to renounce his obsession. When Concha gets up to leave, Pasqual begs, "Don't go, I don't want to offend you." Concha's appropriation of the lit 'phallus' now signifies Pasqual's reluctant, fearful acceptance of Concha's use of his wealth without any 'strings' attached. Concha not only spends the money on herself and Mother, but insists that he share it with others—be it a passing beggar or Morenito, who, like Antonio, is a rival. The moment wherein Concha transfers a lit cigarette from Pasqual's mouth to Morenito's and demands that Pasqual supply the bullfighter with money for dinner, acts as an extension of the earlier ones wherein Morenito and the Turk blow smoke in Pasqual's face. This scene is the climax in a sequence that begins with Pasqual declaring, "I love you Concha, life without you means nothing," to which Concha, back turned to Pasqual and primping in front of a mirror, nonchalantly replies, "One moment and I'll give you a kiss."

It becomes increasingly evident that Pasqual's '*l'amour fou*' is based on a seemingly irrational need to acquire Concha no matter what the 'cost.' As noted, Concha's value as a sexual commodity is dependent upon market demand—she becomes more valuable when she is the focus of other men's desires, be it Antonio, Morenito, the men who pack into the club to cheer her wildly, the lover she secretly entertains in the room over the club, or the fact that she is the 'toast of Spain.' Devirginizing Concha is far from the issue in Sternberg's rendition of Louys' narrative: he drops the 'mocita' aspect early on. It is quite evident that Dietrich is far from the image of sexual innocence nor anywhere near the luscious child/virgin eroticized by Louys and evident, for example, in Angela Molina's Concha in the Bunuel version.

Although "burning with shame" Pasqual always returns—right up until the end. Like Narcissus, Pasqual is locked in an

endless circle, attracted to an image he cannot escape. If he accepts his fantasy construct as an illusion, it signals his death. Concha's desirability can only increase in direct proportion to the impossibility of controlling her, yet it is precisely this inability that Don Pasqual fears most—for if Concha indeed cannot be bought, regulated or dominated through the conventional avenues of power open to men, and especially men of the ruling class, she risks unmasking Pasqual's worst fears: that of his fallibility, powerlessness and ultimately even death. This explains, in part, why Pasqual is so willing to put up with and accept the steady stream of abuse and humiliation; the alternative is far more threatening.

Pasqual's submerged fears of death intermittently surface. After Concha performs her sexually suggestive number, she joins Pasqual's box, transferring the cigarette from his mouth to her own. "My motions seem to make little impression . . . have you no fear of death?", to which Concha answers, deadpan, "No, not today. I feel too happy. Why do you ask? Are you going to kill me?" In fact, this "fear of death" is Pasqual's, evoked through the gesture of 'castration' (removing the phallus-substitute) and through his frustrated desire to own Concha exclusively. It is unusual that a classic Hollywood film of this time would blatantly present the female love-interest as being constantly threatened with either death or physical abuse. At one point in Pasqual's narration he describes how he walked the streets, deciding whether to leave her or kill her (recalling Antonio's first signs of a sexual interest, the sling-shots bursting balloons). When Pasqual bursts in on Concha's and Morenito's lovemaking, she correctly describes him as bursting in like an "assassin." She scoffs at his threats with her verbal retort "Are you my father? My husband? My lover?" challenging his notions of domination and 'ownership.' Pasqual's reply to this threat to his role as dominator is a brutal beating.⁸ Pasqual continues to narrate that Concha returned the next day ("She wasn't through yet") and her first words were, "Good morning. I came to see if you were dead . . . If you loved me enough . . ." When Antonio later meets Concha he boasts, "I could kill you . . . in cold blood," before agreeing to join her for 'coffee' and for a game of 'cards' (a euphemism for sexual play) in her private café suite. After Pasqual's note arrives, Concha argues, "If I destroyed your life, you couldn't write such letters, could you?", and Antonio replies, "I'd wring your neck." This threat is then followed by their passionate embrace.

This subliminal fear of death is visually reiterated through the *mise-en-scène* when Pasqual bursts into Concha's suite, just in time to witness Antonio embracing Concha (transgressing the Law of the Father). As the orchestra crashes momentarily, Pasqual is conspicuously framed against a mural of a bullfighter, trapped against a fence, about to be gored, while another bullfighter is being flung in the air; in the background an expectant crowd of spectators looks on. Concha dubs him the prophetic "King of Spades," signifying death, and Pasqual reasserts his threatened prowess by shooting out the Queen's heart.⁹

Pasqual's only explanation for his behaviour is significantly to Antonio: "I'm not going to lose her." Concha is still the object, talked about and never directly addressed (Antonio is not any different; he refers to Concha as 'preserves'). Concha incisively retorts, "How can you lose what you never possessed?" For Pasqual, the choice of a duel is an appropriate resolution: it represents an archaic ritual wherein a male can defend an anachronistic code and safeguard his property and self-esteem. Concha's summation of Pasqual's motives is only too correct. "You've never loved me . . . You've always mistaken your vanity for love." It is not for love that Pasqual



fights, but for vanity—to obliterate any threat to his patriarchal rights which include his rights to the property he's staked out in the form of Concha. He is defending the ownership Concha has consistently denied him.

The moment when Pasqual shoots in the air marks a significant change in the position he has maintained throughout in the sense that it marks the first time he does something for Concha without any semblance of a transaction or hope for an exchange. (Concha's last remark to Pasqual before the duel is "It's your final mistake . . . Go and kill the only man I've ever loved . . .") It is significantly after this gesture that Concha's 'mask' begins to drop and she is able to acknowledge Pasqual's desires as he has finally acknowledged hers. This moment signifies Pasqual's acceptance of Concha's refusal to participate in the gender-class system and the end of his insistence on maintaining it. And it is the moment wherein Pasqual submits to his 'death' wish—he tries to consummate a fear and a desire that has consistently plagued him—the ultimate moment of castration that he has been increasingly condoning throughout. (Pasqual's resignation of his army commission is an earlier manifestation of the same desire.) This act of 'castration' or loss of power is only negative within a masculinist world that equates survival with domination. Subconsciously Pasqual may desperately wish to seek this release, to relinquish the yoke of patriarchy.

These sequences recall the film's opening images: under a state of continued repression, any expression of sexuality (particularly uncontrolled female sexuality) goes hand in hand with impotence, punishment, and fears of death. Concha's increasingly assertive transgressions coincide with the carnival veering further and further out of control, signalling a breakdown of law and order. When Concha secretly visits Antonio, their embrace is superimposed over the scene in Governor Paquito's jail, wherein masked revellers are chained to the wall. The people are rebelling. Paquito is shrieking, "I'll teach them to behave"; he can't get his assistant to erect their umbrella in the rain, and then finds out that Don Pasqual has been shot in a duel. As Paquito's system swings out of control, so does Pasqual's. Both men are paralleled (the similarity in names adds to the comparison) as bearers of the Law who encounter difficulties in enforcing their oppressive codes. Both men are flattered through vanity (Concha 'pleads,' "Don't shout, Paquito, you know I'm afraid of you"). Both vacillate when it comes to enforcing their Laws, as if not totally committed to the roles they are forced to play; both men finally submit to Concha, one by shooting in the air, one by supplying her with passports to escape with her lover. In Sternberg's vision, the male's recognition of female desire accompanies a disintegration of a masculine dominant society both in terms of sexual and social relationships of oppression. The masculine ritual of protecting property, the duel, becomes meaningless and on the last night of the carnival, the police state can no longer control the rebellious crowd.

Sternberg's film makes no plans for any form of social change yet the ending and the film's overall tone are significantly ambivalent. Dietrich's Concha remains a strong survivor. Having sent off her disappointed lover (once unmasked he is far less interesting) she lingers alone, equally unmasked, and asks for a cigarette, commenting on having once worked in a cigarette factory. The cigarette gesture is not without meaning by this point in the film; it has come to represent Concha's commitment to fight and gain power in a world where these privileges are unique to men. Her comment

regarding the factory is meaningful in that it attests to her painful awareness of the world within which she struggles—one based on economic inequality and sexual domination. And her 'sigh' which accompanies her statement comments on her unhappiness at having to pose and play a game or a role in order to realize her desires. Her choice to stay with Pasqual (this is an ambiguous possibility) over the certainty of leaving with Antonio is also significant. At least Pasqual relinquishes, however momentarily, his overriding demands for *her* needs. Concha's appearance in the final sequence—her relaxed stance, softened makeup and less elaborate dress (the exact inverse of the introductory image) suggests succinctly that the strategies of masquerade and performance are necessitated by a social environment that distorts female identity into a perverse construct of 'femininity.' *The Devil Is A Woman* destroys traditional stereotypes and expectations of the dangerous, manipulative 'noir' woman and, however acerbic, finally empathizes with the female protagonist's needs and desires,¹⁰ foregrounding the manner in which the system creates generic grotesques. Considering the formal and ideological demands of classic Hollywood, one can hardly hope for a radical reconstruction of this system. The film does, however, counter the male narrating point of view, leaving the spectator with Concha as she lingers contemplatively, deciding her next move. She is left on the road, alone, uncompromised and in transition.¹¹ □

FOOTNOTES

1. It is interesting to compare *The Devil Is A Woman* with *That Obscure Object of Desire*; however, it is a project beyond the scope of a footnote. Both films parody the male narrating 'voice' through various distancing techniques (the splitting of the Concha character into two parts played by two distinct actresses is one of the most obvious in the Bunuel version) and both films set the male protagonist's pursuit of Concha against a background of class violence. It is worth noting that Sternberg's rendition ventures further in demystifying the enigmatic Concha and creating a character with whom one can finally empathize.
2. Sontag, Susan: "Notes on 'Camp,'" *A Susan Sontag Reader* (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1982), p. 112.
3. *Ibid*, p. 105.
4. *Ibid*, p. 109.
5. *Ibid*, p. 116.
6. Doane, Mary Ann: "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23 No. 3/4 (Sept/Oct 1982), p. 81.
7. Studlar, Gaylyn: "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema," in Nichols, Bill (ed.), *Movies and Methods Volume II* (University of California Press, 1985), pp. 607-609.
8. In a lecture on the construction of masculinity (York University, March 1984), Varda Burstyn outlined the various means whereby men of different social classes assert their power and domination. The ruling class can buy power through capital, the bourgeoisie use the power of language (as well as capital) and the working class assert power through 'brawn' or physical force. Pasqual has tried, unsuccessfully, to buy Concha, and to convince her with promises of marriage, etc. He finally resorts to physical violence.
9. In the corner of Concha's card is the name "Judith." This may be an allusion to the biblical character, Judith (the book of *Judith* forms a part of the *Apocrypha*). Judith defeated the enemy by luring the general, Holofernes, using sexuality as a deadly weapon. Like Concha, she defeats male domination by playing the roles they expect of her.
10. I take issue with the sort of gossip offered as scholarship/literature in, for example, Charles Higham's book on Dietrich (Higham, Charles, *Marlene: The Life of Marlene Dietrich*, W.W. Norton and Co., N.Y., 1977) at p. 144. Higham suggests that the film is Von Sternberg's "most personal attack on Marlene to date."
11. It is significant that Dietrich subverts masculine-dominated laws without becoming a monster-tyrant (as in *The Scarlet Empress*) or a frigid man-woman (as in the nightclub scene in Paris near the end of *Blonde Venus*).

OPPOSITE: *The Devil Is a Woman*: 'Femininity' as masquerade.

BLONDE VENUS:

Memory, Legend,
and Desire



Blonde Venus: Dietrich and domesticity.

by Peter Baxter

It is my belief that, however strange it may sound, we must reckon with the possibility that something in the nature of the sexual instinct itself is unfavourable to the realization of complete satisfaction.¹

All of the objects of imaginary identification function as substitutes for the absolute object of desire, long-repressed, long-forgotten, what Lacan calls, "the absolute desire for the Other." This desire can never be satisfied. Even at the end of a successful analysis the subject is faced with the impossibility of completing the chain of significations back to an accessible and irreducible reality.²

C'est autour des premières perceptions de notre mère, telle que nous l'avons ressentie et que pour nous elle était la vie—même si nous étions souffrants et que c'était difficile—que s'est ombrqué notre rêve d'exister.³

1. The Staging of Desire

FOR contemporary criticism, *Blonde Venus* is among the most provocative of Josef von Sternberg's films. In textual complexity it is distinct among the family melodramas that constitute a staple commodity of Hollywood production. Researchers interested in psychoanalytic theory and issues raised by the feminist movement have made *Blonde Venus* a focus for cultural interrogation.⁴ In this light, it is interesting to note that, when it was released in 1932, *Blonde Venus* seems to have been unsuccessful at the box office and disliked by most reviewers. In his autobiography, Josef von Sternberg himself virtually dismisses the film as without importance. I believe that recent critics and theorists have been drawn to the film for the same reason that, in a vastly different context of reception, popular audiences found it unattractive, and that its director could not or would not discuss it.

As with much of Sternberg's work, *Blonde Venus* deals with sexual longing as a problem that is ultimately irresolvable. Unlike any of his other films, it elaborates on the origin of both the longing and the problem, in the crossing of two axes of deep family involvement: husband and wife, mother and child. Crucial in this elaboration is the representation of the woman on stage that has been a point of contention for writing on Sternberg's work since the *Cahiers du Cinéma* article on *Morocco* in 1970, and especially since Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975.⁵ Although the scene of this staging may well relate to specifically masculine anxieties, I would argue that it is more significant for harbouring within it an irreducible datum of human sexuality and identification, upon which the manifold varieties of desire are founded. Every child born of woman passes through a crucial phase of self-identification as a fundamental condition of

entering social life. In the schema of the family, across the gap of a real separation—bridged by sight, sound, scent and touch—we identify either with the woman whose flesh we once shared, or with another who enters the scene, and who also perceives the woman from a separate position. With her or with the other who sees her; identifying in part with the one and the other; identifying in different registers along the avenues of perception open to us as sensual beings: whatever course any one of us takes, She is the one perceived.

Admitting this need not entail any descent into biological essentialism to account for and rationalise the symbolic representation and social uses of sexual difference. It does suggest the need to remember that the other in relation to whom our earliest subjectivity normally begins to take form, is a woman who is herself marked by systems of gender discrimination. It is in relation to her—as object of sight, touch, scent, hearing, taste—that each of us sets off on the route to a selfhood that includes conscious and unconscious schemas of sexual identity. Losing her, an event that none of us can ever make good, is at the bottom of the human experience of desire.

Before turning to *Blonde Venus*, we might well look at *Morocco* (1930) for an exemplary instance of the staging of the woman that occurs time and again in Sternberg's films. Early in the film, Amy Jolly, the character played by Marlene Dietrich, dressed in a man's formal evening clothes, performs in a North African cabaret. The sequence in which this occurs uses the space of the cabaret—its stage, ramp, boxes, pit—to structure the play of look and position by which distinctions are structured and desires manifested. By this point in the film, Amy Jolly has been established as a woman who is out of place, having abandoned Europe and a mysterious past, a "suicide passenger" on a one-way ticket to Africa. Having already scorned the shipboard advances of the wealthy Frenchman, LaBessière, and ignored the excited advice of the cabaret owner, LoTinto, she strolls onto the cabaret stage, cigarette carelessly between her fingers, to the jeering welcome of the clientele.

The audience section of the cabaret is itself a theatre, entered by characters playing—and watching others play—elaborate games of seduction and deception, along and across class barriers. The "democratic" behaviour of the artist-manqué LaBessière is a source of gossipy wonder to his aristocratic European acquaintances. They snicker at the unmentionable background of Mme César, wife of the Foreign Legion Adjutant whose table LaBessière has joined. Tom Brown, the handsome American legionnaire played by Gary Cooper, swaggers into the section of the pit occupied by the common soldiers, and waves cheerily to Mme César, a gesture from which she just manages to divert her husband's eyes (but not LaBessière's). Settled into his chair, Brown loftily accepts the late apologies of a blowsy Spanish-Moroccan woman who has breathlessly hurried on to the scene.

Thus the atmosphere into which Amy Jolly enters is thick not only with cigarette smoke, but with smouldering relations. This is not only a cabaret; it is the theatre of desire, which she had quite explicitly left behind her, and where she is now to assume a leading role. It is notable that she is not simply the object of the looks of the principal males, who will become rivals in their passion to possess her. Nor is her film-image ever so disengaged from narrative connections that it can devolve

into a simple, direct fetish object for the fantasies of a masculine viewer. She strolls onstage in a full shot that excludes any of the cabaret-audience, and that is succeeded by a close-up of Tom Brown, quite obviously entranced by her appearance. But, as Tom Brown stands up in a high-angle long shot to applaud, and to threaten the catcalling soldiers around him, the film cuts twice to big close-ups of Amy Jolly, pensively watching the tall legionnaire, who has become a spectacle for her, in a significant reciprocity of points of view. Later, in the midst of her number, which speaks the distance she had put between herself and desire—"Lorsque tout est fini/Quand se meurt votre beau rêve"—the sequence cuts on eyeline matches from Amy Jolly in medium close-up, to LaBessière, back to Amy Jolly, who turns the direction of her glance to meet that of Tom Brown, shown in a succeeding shot. At the end of the sequence, this Amy Jolly who had torn up and flicked away the calling card that LaBessière had given her aboard the ship bound for Morocco, echoes that earlier gesture and reverses its significance as she tosses to Tom Brown the flower she had taken from the hair of a woman in the audience, in exchange for a scandalous kiss. Having placed herself beyond wanting, Amy Jolly signals her return to its imperatives even as she leaves the stage upon which she has triumphed over the audience's ill will.

The male garb worn by Amy Jolly, that has made Marlene Dietrich's image a continuing symbol of ambiguous sexuality, can be read several ways in terms of the film's textual systems. Most obviously, given the portrayal of Amy Jolly to the point of this cabaret number, it suggests her assumed position outside heterosexual desire. Yet, no sooner has Tom Brown seen her than he is mesmerised by her presence. He is not the only one. The sequence balances Tom Brown's riveted image on one side of Amy Jolly with that of LaBessière on the other. And there is another patron, in front of whose table Amy Jolly begins to sing, whose stroking hand she coolly shrugs off, to his haughty annoyance. Certainly, part of the continuing fascination with her image lies in its fetishistic implication, and in the appeal of that implication to narcissistic desire. But, quite clearly, the sequence also positions Amy Jolly herself as the subject of desire, and of spectator identification. It is neither LaBessière nor the fondling patron, both of whom wear costume similar to her own, to whom she is drawn, but the young legionnaire in uniform, whom she first sees as he threatens to rough up his fellow soldiers. Her desire is of a distinct, masochistic order, and its evolution during the film is partially signified by the vestimentary code. It should be remembered that by the end, dressed in a thin blouse and skirt, shaking off her high heels into the sand, she trudges into the sandy wastes at its behest, in pursuit of Tom Brown. When their affair begins, however, her costume in the cabaret aligns her with LaBessière and his class in sharp distinction to that of Tom Brown. Having won her, the latter abruptly decides to abandon her after, pointedly, looking into her mirror and trying on her top hat in place of his own kepi. The reflection this time implies that he usurps an identity not his own. It provokes too much anxiety for the young man to deal with, and he sets off with his company, leaving the woman he desires to the older LaBessière, whose wealth and position seem to validate the precedence of his claim. Tom Brown again takes up with the half-caste prostitutes that he had sought in the past.⁶

The point of this analysis is that the presentation of the Marlene Dietrich character on stage in Sternberg's films cannot be interpreted without taking into account both the immediate sequence, and the associative chains of signifiers that lace out through the film and endow it with an allusive coherence. With *Blonde Venus* this is particularly important.

The staging is a nodal point of a scenario at which several trajectories of desire cross and realign themselves, and from which new relations are determined. The rivalry that is implicitly Oedipal in *Morocco* is explicitly inscribed in the later film as the decisive contest for the possession of a body and of selfhood.

There are three sequences in *Blonde Venus* where Dietrich's character sings in nightclub performances. None is as complex as the just-described sequence from *Morocco*, but each of the three is significantly different from the other two, and together they describe a journey of symbolic importance. The first is the "Hot Voodoo" number, renowned for the moment in which Dietrich emerges from an ape costume, clad in feathers, fur, and glinting sequins. The second is a relatively subdued rendition of a wry song, in a simple nightclub set. The last number is set in an opulent "Parisian" theatre, and reprises the classic Marlene Dietrich image: she strolls onstage through filmy curtains, wearing a white top hat and tails, smoking a cigarette in a long holder, to sing the nonsensical tune, "I Couldn't Be Annoyed."

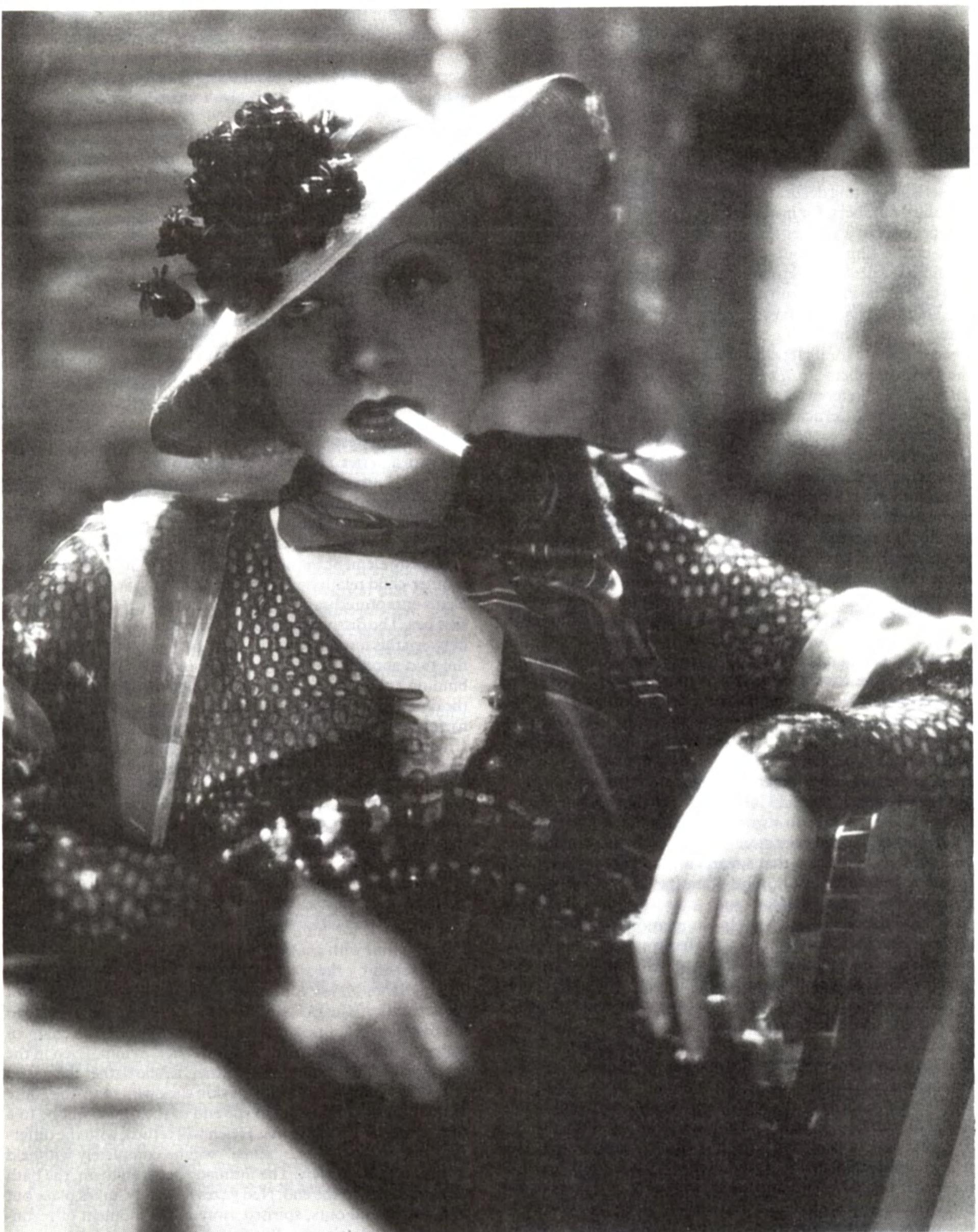
"Hot Voodoo" is the most complex of the three sequences in terms of the *mise-en-scène*, editing, and the subject relations that are put into play. An elaborate prologue brings Helen Jones—the Dietrich character—to the stage, unrecognisably costumed as a captured ape. The number itself consists of a series of 11 shots alternating for the most part between Helen and Nick Townsend—the man with whom she will have an affair—in the audience, watching her. His gaze offscreen is portrayed in several big close-ups, and his relation to Helen is over-inscribed by means of extreme low-angle shots of her, suggesting that she is seen from his point of view. In the midst of this series, a full shot of Helen from directly in front dollies in to a big close-up, then backs off in a slight reframing.

Unlike the number from *Morocco* described above, the "Hot Voodoo" number from *Blonde Venus* rigidly excludes any suggestion of the woman's subjective perception from the stage. The only diegetic point of view that matters is Nick's, and the long dolly-in just mentioned is a key instrument for allying the experience of the film-spectator with that of Nick in the night-club audience. In its movement it inscribes the sequence with the sense of the insuperable distance that lies between the subject and "the absolute object of desire." Helen's subjective position is yet to be represented, becoming most apparent in the long, centre-sequence of the film: her flight with her son.

In contrast to this relatively lavish expenditure of shots, the second number, in which Helen sings "You Little So-and-So" ("look what you've done to me"), consists of but two shots. A single long take, a medium shot, tracks with Helen, keeping a more or less constant distance from her as she steps from a low stage into an audience of well-dressed men and women who are largely hidden among luxuriant palm fronds. As she sings, she gestures with a mock-accusing finger at various men seated around her. The final lines of her song are delivered from offscreen over a shot of a heavy-set man (a detective? the club-owner?) who is being shown Helen's picture in a newspaper, published because she is a "missing person," on the run with her son from her jealous husband. He squints offscreen at her, in a shot that carries a distinct echo of the shots of Nick that punctuated the first number.

In Paris, finally, Helen's performance of "I Couldn't Be Annoyed" is mounted in a symmetrically elegant sequence of five shots. In the first and fifth shots the camera executes

OPPOSITE: From wife to prostitute: Marlene Dietrich in **Blonde Venus**.



intricate and exuberant craning movements, as it follows Helen on the stage and ramp of a theatre. The second and fourth are from a single setup, of gentlemen in the audience stretching their necks and raising their opera glasses for a better view of Helen and Nick. These latter are shown in the third shot, in medium close-up, chatting as she stands next to the aisle seat he occupies.

The image deployed by these stagings is in each the focus for the same fantasy, or rather, each is a re-staging (and therefore a fantasy and a distortion) of a lost moment in which desire and identity are born, to which the film alludes in two privileged images. While the stagings draw upon fetishistic elements (the glinting decoration on Helen's costumes in the first and third numbers, for instance), nevertheless these scenes are components in a greater textual process which from the first shot of the film sets out, defines, modulates, reforms, and qualifies the problematic nature of sexual identity. The top hat and tails of the Paris number signify, again as in *Morocco*, that the Dietrich character has set herself outside the bounds of heterosexual desire, while at the same time it provokes that desire precisely for its fetishistic suggestion. I shall argue that the three numbers in *Blonde Venus* are transformations of earlier textual references to the origin of desire, and that they lead on to a final, crucial image at the end of the film. In doing so, *Blonde Venus* recognizes that the mother-child relationship is absolutely fundamental in human sociality, in the sense that from it is generated the different and culturally-specific world of post-Oedipal relations. In a paper on perversion that is pertinent in this context, the New Zealand born, Paris-based psychoanalyst Joyce McDougall considers the infantile, pre-verbal origin of identity: "The first 'difference' is the difference between two bodies. This refers us to the maternal voice and to the mother's way of rocking, feeding, fondling her baby, thereby referring to everything that occurs *between the mother and the body of the child*."⁷

It is to the structure of this relationship between two bodies that the socio-textual process of "staging" is most profoundly related, whether it is the staging that occurs through the whole institutionalised system of live events, from the lowliest strip-club to the most lavish Las Vegas revues, or it is the filmic staging that is worked over in Sternberg's films. Such events re-stage the legendary instance of separation from the maternal body in which the child is turned in the direction of sexual identity. For the person turned in the direction of woman/wife/mother, the eventual attachment to a child opens a privileged avenue to the past that a man normally does not follow. *Blonde Venus* portrays the bond of mother and child in terms that seem to foreshadow the much later words of the radical psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray: "In her relation to the child she finds compensatory pleasure for the frustrations she encounters in sexual relations proper. Thus maternity supplants the deficiencies of repressed female sexuality."⁸ It is difficult to overestimate the importance and thoroughgoing textual presence of this theme in *Blonde Venus*.

2. The Legendary Scene

TOWARD the beginning of the film, in a kind of hollow between the credit sequence and the inception of the narrative itself, a woman's body flashes across the surface of a pond that is the background for the main titles. Unidentified, she seems to push away the bodyless, superimposed names of "The Players," and disturbs the placid reflection of sky and trees into the glinting twist of her passage. This original gesture of the film, occurring before the eye has become occupied by the chain of diegetic agents, emphasises that the transition to subjectivity begins with the

sight of a body, indistinct and fleeting. It is precisely at such a point of view that the structures of the ego begin to be precipitated, for the spectator of the film, and for human subjects in general. But the film also insistently inserts the body into the other perceptual relations that figure in the interminable flight of fancy that is selfhood. Even in the cinema, disposed by its very mechanism to address the scopic drive, seeing is not the whole of the game. Helen is also touched. She touches. And she is heard.

In particular, the nurturing, tactile relations between Helen and her son Johnny enter into dynamic opposition to the privilege of scopic structures. It is of course critical to these relations that while a father's child is wholly other, the mother's is in a real sense a transformation of her own body. The film's allusion to this is clear.

Before she has become a cabaret singer in New York City, while she is still a housewife married to a research scientist, Helen and Ned tell their son, Johnny, his bedtime story. She stops Ned from speaking (even in the sentimental language of fairy-tale) about conception and birth. But the film has already spoken of it to us, earlier in the film, in a long dissolve from the forest pond where the tale begins. In the film's first sequence, Ned and his friends, students together, on a walking tour of Germany, have come to the pond to spy upon a group of bathing actresses. Picking out Ned and Helen, the sequence goes to a series of close-ups as they talk to one another. Finally, Helen angrily pushes off from the edge of the pond and the scene dissolves to a pair of childish legs kicking and splashing in a bathtub, as Johnny sits up into view.⁹

This is not only a very beautiful and economical transition, it is a key element in the film's development of the realm of mother-child relations. Helen has just been shown trapped by Ned's enraptured gaze, confined by it to the pond in which he sees her. The dissolve condenses everything that must happen between this moment and the birth of their child. The water in the two shots is the vehicle for a uterine metaphor and a binding reference to the moment of birth. The continuity of the dissolve figures the material transformation of flesh that is foetal development. Thus the gaze along which one relation is structured leads to the physical metamorphosis that is the basis for another. Furthermore, the dissolve that represents Johnny's birth as a separation of one body from another, carries a step further the textual process begun with the spectator's glimpse of the flashing, virtually incorporeal swimmer at the end of the main titles: Johnny's legs enter the frame from the bottom, at first disembodied, as if they came from the very place of the spectator.

Helen's physical separation from Johnny is the central issue of her desire for him. Once Ned's jealousy is aroused by Helen's affair with another man (and like Ned's desire, Nick's is awakened by the sight of Helen), he will attempt to take Johnny from Helen completely. Eventually, the distance of the separation, the gauge of her desire, is stretched literally to the distance of an ocean (one element more in the chain of water-signifiers) before she is drawn back to him. Even in the first shot of the two of them together, as she bathes the naked little boy standing in the tub, his skin slick with soap, the allure of their relation is tactile. In the end of the film it will be to a similar scene of bathing that Helen will return, with the difference that in the end the "scene" will be completely withheld from spectatorial view. The intimacy between them, the bath toward which, in the end, Ned gazes forlornly, takes place out of his sight and ours, spirited away in the moment of reconstructing the patriarchy. But the existence of this other, tactile order means that neither the body nor the meaning of desire are completely subject to the eye and masculine dominion.

Besides the tactile mapping of the body,¹⁰ the realm of the

"heard" is of special significance for a film in which a mother's lullaby and the tune of a music-box are laid against the siren-song of a cabaret singer. In a paper on Freud's concept of the origin of fantasy, Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis write:

In the first theoretical sketches suggested to him by the question of fantasy, Freud accords importance to . . . the role of the heard . . . the irruption of the heard breaks the continuity of the undifferentiated perceptual field and at the same time creates a sign (the noise that is sought and perceived in the night), placing the subject in the interpolated position. . . . But the heard is also—and this the second motif to which Freud explicitly makes allusion in the passage in question—the story, or the legend of the parents, of the grandparents, of the ancestor: the saying or familial noise, this spoken or secret discourse, prior to the subject, by which he will occur and be located.¹¹

The film closes on an insert of the music-box that plays Johnny's lullabye. It is seen from his point of view (the only shot from the child's point of view in the film), as he stretches out his hand through the bars of his crib, and drifts into the sleep that ends the film. Johnny's *seeing* here, and his efforts to *touch*, are preceded by what he *hears* earlier in the film, and asks to hear again when Helen has finally come home: the family "legend" of desire and fulfillment. The film begins with Helen seen by her future husband, but the significance of that seeing is that it is transformed into the words and rhythm of language, into the legend ritually told to Johnny at bedtime. The dissolve from the forest pool to Johnny in the bathtub condenses into an unproblematic metamorphosis the issue that Freud called the basic difficulty of human life, knowing where we come from. The dissolve is a distortion that omits conflict, pain, and ecstasy in favour of seamless process. The legend told to Johnny in the evenings before he goes to sleep works over that event again, revises it into a story but endows it with the glamour of a fairy tale, or what E. Ann Kaplan calls, after Freud, a "family romance."¹²

Thus, in the first sequence in which father, mother, and child are together, we hear the bedtime story that Johnny has heard many times before, but wants to hear again:

JOHNNY: Go on Mommy: "It was springtime in Germany . . ."

HELEN: It was springtime in Germany and it was warm. I had spring fever. And the air was full of blossoms.

JOHNNY (looks to Ned): Now it's your turn.

NED: Well, let's see. I was out with some other students on a walking trip and very soon we came to a dragon sitting in an automobile who told us there was a magic pool in the forest.

JOHNNY: And what did you do?

NED: Oh we went to the pool, of course. And what do you suppose we saw?

JOHNNY: What?

NED: Imagine! Half a dozen princesses taking a bath!

JOHNNY (Turning to Helen): And what did you do when you saw him?

HELEN: Oh, I told him to go away.

JOHNNY: And did he?

HELEN: He did not!

JOHNNY (Looking at Ned): And what happened then?

NED: The most beautiful princess of all said that if I'd go away she'd grant me my wish.

JOHNNY: And what did you wish?

NED: I wished . . . to see her again. I couldn't think of anything better to wish, so that night I went to a theatre. The music began to play. And out upon the stage stepped

this princess, and she looked more beautiful than ever. Oh she was beautiful!

JOHNNY: And then your heart began to go like this, huh? (Thumps the chest of his teddy-bear.) And Mommy began to sing?

NED: And my heart stopped beating entirely!

JOHNNY (Turning to Helen): What happened to you when you saw him?

HELEN: I could hardly sing and I could barely wait until I saw him again.

JOHNNY: But you did see him again, didn't you?

HELEN: Mm-hm. I met him later that night.

JOHNNY: What happened then?

HELEN: You can never guess. We went walking.

JOHNNY: Go on, walk!

HELEN: OK, skipper. (Arm in arm, Helen and Ned walk across the darkened room.) And then we came to a park.

NED: Only there was a tremendously large yellow moon up in the sky. It was altogether too big and too bright.

HELEN: But it was dark under the trees, very dark!

NED (Lifting a child's robe over their heads): This is a tree, Johnny.

JOHNNY: And what happened under the tree?

HELEN: Then he kissed me. (They kiss.)

JOHNNY: And what happened then? (He is tiring.)

NED: Then we were married.

JOHNNY: And . . . then? (Falls asleep.)

NED: And then . . . we started to think about you, Johnny.

HELEN (Placing her hand on his mouth): Shhh! Get out of here.

This discourse—dialogue, prompting, gaze and enactment—transforms an event into a legend, and through legend symbolises an order. Helen "could hardly sing and (she) could barely wait until (she) saw him again," that is, until she saw Ned seeing her again. For Ned's part, he "couldn't think of anything better to wish" than to see her again, on the stage of a theatre, in the place of spectacle. The legend is a privileged instrument for reifying the order of seeing, from certain places, as certain subjects. With the ritual telling over, Johnny is finally lulled to sleep precisely by the singing that Helen could "hardly" manage when Ned came to see her. To the accompaniment of the music box, she sings to him in German, the "mother tongue" that in its exoticism reduces the precise referential meaning to unimportance, and invests everything in the pure lilt of her voice.

The legend of desire tells Johnny of a scene by a "magic pool in the forest" that the spectators of the film have already seen. But it also tells of events that have been withheld from the spectator by the short-circuiting dissolve from the pool to Johnny: the events of that evening, at the theatre and afterwards, when the initial sighting that gave rise to desire was replayed and played out. These events take the form of a reassuring, ritualised legend for Johnny, who is entering the world of subjectivity, identity, and desire. For the spectator of the film, however, they are displaced into the major narrative movement of the film, where they are portrayed as conflict and resolution. This movement displays a knowledge that the legend harbours and obscures: the fact that desire, which began the relation of Johnny's parents, and became inextricably bound up with his very being, can also—will also—pull the relation apart and fracture the child's world.

Thus the narrative of *Blonde Venus* is constructed around a series of scenes that increasingly problematise the nature of desire: the flashing swimmer; Ned's gaze at Helen in the pool, and the consequent "birth" of Johnny; the legendary scene of parental desire as told to Johnny. Hardly has the lovely tale



Blonde Venus: Helen flees with her son.

been told, and Johnny soothed into sleep by his mother's voice, than Helen announces to Ned that she is going back on the stage, back into the eye of desire; and the film moves into the conflictual, consequential series that is its principal narrative line.

The "Hot Voodoo" number pulls the second part of that legendary scene into view—"Oh she was beautiful!"—in such a way as to captivate Nick in his turn, and prepare the circumstances that force Helen out of marriage and family. It models out precisely that distanced, insatiable desire that is initiated in the process by which the child is separated from the mother, and set on the way toward an individual identity. The second number, taking place while Helen is in the midst of her flight with Johnny, is a sequence that gives no return of look from a spectator within the film as Helen sings a song that places the blame for her dislocation on the men in the audience around her ("You so-and-so/You little so-and-so/Look what you've done to me"). No look is returned, that is, except for the single close-up of the man at its close, whose suspicious gaze is succeeded by a shadowy sequence in which Helen must rouse a sleepy Johnny from his bed to flee once more into the night. The Paris sequence rounds a cycle: Nick appears to be Ned's rival; narratively, however, he is his symbolic agent, Ned in another guise, whose narrative function is to steer Helen back home and to her family. Once back in the apartment, possession of the look passes back to Ned, whose it was in the legendary scene, sealing up the disturbances that the film had produced in its representation of desire. But the look, and the acquiescence to it, even within the family, do not guarantee an unproblematic bond. The look co-exists with the remnant, pre-Oedipal relation between mother and child, in a crossing that produces both the strength of the family and the tension out of which the generational history of desire develops. For the desire of the child will itself come to turn primarily on the

axis of the look, when the separation between self and other is finally achieved.

3. From First Shot to Last

THE embrace of Ned and Helen in the last scene is not the final moment of *Blonde Venus*. There follow upon it two shots which end the film, though in the chronology of desire they could be said to figure its origin. The last image but one is a close-up of Johnny on his pillow, rousing himself briefly from the brink of sleep, and gazing off-screen. Cut to his point of view: the music box with the merry-go-round of cupids is tinkling out its melody beyond the bars of Johnny's crib. The shot is slightly out of focus, a true subjective shot, suggesting the child's sleepy-eyed perception. His hand reaches toward the music box. The plaintive little notes swell into a full orchestration of the lullabye. Fade out.

From the first shot, of the forest pool, to the last, of the music box, the movement of the film has been to set an object into the gaping place of desire. The work of the film is to show how it is that Helen comes into that mythical place. *Blonde Venus* is most concerned with the lineage of desire, with the formation that it is given from one generation to the next.

The legendary scene is picked apart and reworked in the body of the film until the final sequence where Helen once again takes up the position of Mother for Johnny, "the woman who feeds him,"¹³ washes him and grooms him, where the sole line she addresses to her husband—apart from the ritual dialogue of the legendary scene—is "Let me stay with you both, Ned." The marital bond is re-established as a bond on desire, serving to maintain an order that is tense and divergent. There is no place at the end for that earlier, legendary celebration of sexual difference and position that symbol-

lised the origin of the family. "I was very sentimental in those days," says Ned, "and very foolish." Here, at the end of the film, the attempted re-telling and re-enactment of the legend for Johnny stumbles to a halt, unfinished. Crisis. For the little boy the moment has arrived when he must irrevocably turn his attention outside the family for his fulfillment, for recapturing what he can of that legend and the inclusive plenitude of its reaction.

Similarly, the viewing subject at the end of the film is crucially distinct from the subject at the beginning. The pond of the credit shot is "objectless" and "subjectless," immaterial, the gulf of desire, without boundaries or depth, a matter of pure seeing from a position that has no occupant. The reflection on the pond offers and engages a simulacrum of the cinematic apparatus: the sun in the place of the projector lamp, the leaves of the willow reflected on the surface of the water as the film image is thrown upon the screen. The place of desire is hence also the place in which the image is constructed. The last sight in the film is explicitly Johnny's, and in a sense everything leads to this sight, everything has evolved from the pond for this moment in which the spectator takes a destined place on the border of dream. He is reaching toward the object that promises to close the gulf of desire, the object that has been between the Mother's hands, the source of music that has held the Mother's voice. The object is just out of reach, just beyond the cradle, still immersed in the indistinct haze of desire. It is the moment of separation, in which desire is forever constituted in the distance between sight and embrace, and in which the first object is set down for Johnny, in the place just beyond his touch, where his mother once was.¹⁴ On that sight, and in the sound of that music, the shot fades to black, that Johnny may sleep, and that we may find ourselves awake once more in the twilight theatre.

This is the irreducible moment of sexual and ego constitution for every child; it contains the differentiation of the positions in which identities are assumed. To become feminine is to assume the place of that object so desired as it slips away. It is in the place of image, both other and reflection, and it is in being the object of desire that Helen too can have the object, which for her assumes the person of her child. To become masculine is forever to seek and reach for the barred object. It is, to follow the chain of signifiers that *Blonde Venus* establishes, to slide from mother, to the dancing cherubs on the music box, to the legend of "half a dozen princesses taking a bath," to the sight of a group of actresses swimming in a pond in a German forest, to the one among them who returns the look. Helen accepts the position of the wife/mother in the reign of the father. In the moment of her final incorporation by the family, Helen is almost obliterated by Ned: in a high-angle shot looking down on them, his body looms across hers as she closes her eyes and slips under his words. But the course of the last scene to this point, from the moment of her reunion with Johnny, has made it clear that her return carries with it the "compensatory" satisfaction of her relation to Johnny, the fulfillment that is left to woman in the social order: "she still has the child with whom her appetite for touching, for contact, is given free reign."¹⁵ Helen is returned to the position of an object for Ned,¹⁶ a position mitigated by the circumscribed subject relation a mother can enjoy with her child. But for her and her son, the days and nights of being criminals in love are over. In the last two shots of the film, Johnny is on the verge of a symbolic order that is the language of the body and desire as well as the language of words. The difference between the first shot of the film and the last shot is in one respect the difference between nature and culture. In another, it is the difference between the repetitive present of desire, and the irresolvable



Blonde Venus: Mother and child.



ABOVE: The final scene. **BETWEEN:** The last two shots.



past in which self and other were constituted around a signifier that carries human sexuality into an endless "play with the memory of satisfaction."¹⁷

Post Scriptum

IS there anyplace else where this could be said? Only with the end of the film can its reading begin. Consider the apparently throwaway line of one of Ned's companions as they walk toward the forest pool where Helen will be met. Protesting his fatigue, the friend jokes that he is about to drop: "Just cover me with leaves and tell my mother I died with her name on my lips." There is the whole theme of the film, even to the bliss that desire projects on to the image of self-dissolution. □

NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love (Contributions to the Psychology of Love II)," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), Vol. XI, pp. 188-189.
2. Sherry Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics: Freud's French Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978), p. 58.
3. Francoise Dolto, *L'Image inconsciente du corps* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1985).
4. See Robin Wood, "Venus de Marlene," *Film Comment*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (March-April 1978), pp. 58-63; Bill Nichols, "Blonde Venus: Playing with Performance," in *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), pp. 104-132; E. Ann Kaplan, "Fetishism and the repression of Motherhood in Von Sternberg's *Blonde Venus* (1932)," in *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), pp. 49-59.
5. "Morocco," *Cahiers du Cinema*, No. 225 (Nov.-Dec. 1970), pp. 5-13. Trans. Diana Matias, in Sternberg, ed. Peter Baxter (London: British Film Institute, 1980), pp. 81-94. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Autumn 1975), pp. 6-18. Reprinted in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 3rd Edition, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 803-816.
6. Freud's study of the nature of psychical impotence, "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love" (see Note 1, above), provides a useful perspective for interpreting Tom Brown's sudden inability to carry through with his avowed intention to "take this dame and spend a few weeks somewhere along the blue Mediterranean." Freud describes the example of the type of man for whom sexuality and affection are completely dissociated: "Where they love they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love. They seek objects which they do not need to love, in order to keep their sensuality away from the objects they love; and . . . the strange failure shown in psychical impotence makes its appearance whenever an object which has been chosen with the aim of avoiding incest recalls the prohibited object through some feature, often an inconspicuous one." (p. 183)
7. Joyce McDougall, "La sexualité perverse et l'économie psychique" (Pt. ii), in *Les Perversions: Les chemins de traverse* (Livres Robert Laffont, coll. "Les grandes découvertes de la psychanalyse," 1980), p. 293.
8. Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which is Not One," in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), p. 102.
9. By watching the dissolve frame by frame on a viewing table, it is possible to notice that the scene shifts to Johnny's legs not directly from Helen, but from a woman companion, whose face appears at the right of the screen, obscured by a spray of leaves, in the close-up shots of Helen talking to Ned. This companion follows Helen out of the shot as she swims away from the camera. Without wishing to press interpretation beyond the bounds of credibility, I would nevertheless suggest that this displacement is meaningful, that in a film that deals in altered positions and identities, the symbolic distinction between the woman as object of desire, and the woman as mother of a child is an important one. As Johnny's mother, Helen is other than the woman Ned spied and pursued. This is the possible implication of the displaced dissolve: the woman from whose body Johnny evolves is symbolically not the woman whose body was the object of desire. I would also connect this alterity to something that I have always found difficult to comprehend: the scene of Johnny wearing a grotesque Hallowe'en mask on the side of his head, almost Janus-like, during the period of Helen's flight from the police. E. Ann Kaplan interprets this as evidence of the film's "distaste for the nuclear family" (*op. cit.*, p. 56). I would venture that the mask continues the theme of alterity, with the implication that Johnny is other for Helen; whether the mother knows it or not, the suggestion is offered to the film-spectator in the strange shot of the mother warmly kissing the small boy whose bizarre mask leers crazily toward the audience.
10. In *Psychanalyser* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968), Serge Leclaire describes the inscription that organizes the biological body into an erotic text, the inscription carried out by other bodies, already symbolic, entered into a system regulating sexual difference, hierarchy, and desire:

what is it . . . that privileges one zone rather than another, in some way establishes a hierarchy of erogenous cathexes? What singles out genital primacy? . . . The process can be described simply, if incompletely, in relation to one of the predisposed zones: an appropriate object appeases the tension of physiological need that the organ manifests; a satisfaction results that, quite apart from the appeasement obtained from the chosen object, of which no trace remains, is itself inscribed as the anticipation or demand for the return of an impossible "same." Thus the breast or nipple appeases the hunger/thirst of the nursing infant, but what remains is the trace of the satisfaction, which will persist as a demand, even before hunger recurs, and which will be added ever afterwards as a distinct anticipation, to the renewed urgency of the need.

We have seen that pleasure, in the sexual sense of the term, comes about from a play with the memory of satisfaction; it is clear that this pleasure is distinct, and different in principle, from an appeasement of physiological need. (pp. 70-71. My translation.)
11. J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, "Fantasme originaire, fantasme des origines, origine des fantasmes," *Les Temps Modernes*, No. 215 (1964), p. 1854. My translation.
12. Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
13. Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," in *The Standard Edition*, Vol. XIV, p. 87.
14. Johnny's music-box fits almost exactly D.W. Winnicott's description of a "transitional object," and seems to prefigure in representational terms this important concept in understanding the development of subjectivity. Winnicott suggests that, with wide latitude, transitional phenomena begin to take form in the first year of life, and may persist into childhood:

there may emerge some thing or some phenomenon—perhaps a bundle of wood or the corner of a blanket or eiderdown, or a word or tune, or a mannerism—that becomes vitally important to the infant for use at the time of going to sleep, and is a defence against anxiety, especially anxiety of depressive type. Perhaps some soft object or other type of object has been found and used by the infant, and this then becomes what I am calling a *transitional object*. . . . A need for a specific object or a behaviour pattern that started at a very early date may reappear at a later age when deprivation threatens (pp. 4-5).
15. Irigaray, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
16. Robin Wood, *op. cit.*, notes: "Laura Mulvey sees Sternberg's work as centred on the creation of woman as object for the male spectator's gaze. *Blonde Venus*, at least, is fully aware of this: it is an articulated theme rather than an end-product." (p. 61).
17. See Leclaire, *op. cit.*, note 10, above.

ACHING TO SPEAK: Power and Language in Pierre Perrault's *La Bête Lumineuse*

by Geoff Pevere

No woman in the world could say to me, no matter how beautiful, she couldn't make me stay by saying, 'Okay, it's me or that duck' or 'Okay, it's me or the partridge.' I'd just say, 'So long, it's the partridge. No contest.'²

—Bernard L'Heureux in
La bête lumineuse

AN UNSETTLING AND UNRELENTINGLY intimate chronicle of a 10-day hunting trip taken by a group of québécois men, Pierre Perrault's *La bête lumineuse* (*The Shimmering Beast*, 1982) is also among the most thorough and revealing accounts of the social construction and regulation of masculinity ever captured on celluloid. Not surprisingly, given its stubborn unconventionality in formal, political and moral terms, it was savaged (following its international debut in Cannes in 1983) in both French and English mainstream presses in Canada, and with a viciousness that would do the film's own human wolfpack proud. *The Globe and Mail's* Jay Scott, possibly the most widely-read film critic in English Canada, effectively buried the film's chances outside of Québec with a display of moral umbrage so sputteringly offended it fairly begged psychoanalytical scrutiny. Obviously, the movie had touched something deep, primal and sore.

There's no question that *La bête lumineuse* is a profoundly troubling and difficult film, resistant to analysis and elusive to interpretation, and for several equally daunting reasons. What I hope to do is first examine the possible reasons for the film's uncommonly bellicose ejection from the mainstream, and to relate these reasons (as I believe they are intrinsically related) to its profoundly revealing examination of the rituals (particularly those which are exercised through language) which construct and regulate socially condoned definitions of masculinity.

Central to any consideration of *La bête lumineuse's* obstinate position in relation to Canadian cinema (or cinema in general, really) is the obstinate figure of Pierre Perrault himself. A poet, lawyer, broadcaster, filmmaker, and once the most widely studied of Canadian filmmakers (an honour now probably owed to David Cronenberg), Perrault strikes me as a filmmaker who is every bit as stylistically individuated as a Bresson or a Tarkovsky. Long an imposing figure on the landscape of québécois culture, and a once-ardent spokesperson for his province's cultural independence, the path of Perrault's critical reputation has followed the frequently circuitous route taken by nationalist québécois

artists. Initially celebrated within his province for a trilogy of innovative anthropological documentaries chronicling the demise of the rural fishing community living on the Ile-aux-Coudres at the mouth of the St. Lawrence (*Pour la suite du monde*, 1963; *Le règne du jour*, 1966; *Les voitures d'eau*, 1969), Perrault acquired a substantial critical following in Europe as well, and particularly in France, where *Le Monde's* Louis Marcorelles has for years been a particularly insightful and articulate champion of Perrault's self-named *cinéma vécu*, or "lived" cinema. Typically, elsewhere in North America (and excluding a certain rarefied notoriety in film schools and journals, and the conscientious retrieval work of Canadian critics like Peter Harcourt) Perrault remains virtually unknown. Recently however, and for reasons that have as much to do with changes in Québec's socio-political climate as with Perrault's filmmaking practice, the director's realm of influence and favour has been substantially reduced. Since 1972, when Perrault went to the industrially-depleted Abitibi region to document the economic and ecological effects of the James Bay Project on rural residents, his critical status has taken a sharp dive. Most of the footage shot during this period was not made available until nearly 1980, thus seriously dampening his European reputation, and the political climate of post-Parti Québécois Québec shifted in such a way that Perrault, once the champion and chief preserver of an indigenous cultural tradition, was by 1980 being dismissed by some Québec critics as an embarrassingly oblivious cultural anachronism, who "imposes his nationalistic fantasies on a culture he does not understand at all," and whose once-vaunted, pioneering documentary style—*le cinéma vécu*—virtually guarantees a form of myopia, ensuring that "Perrault sees only what he wants to see."³ Only in English Canada, where he virtually had no critical reputation to lose in the first place, was Perrault left unscathed by the passage of time and the vicissitudes of provincial politics or cultural taste. He remained a non-entity.

PERHAPS NOTHING ILLUMINATED THE passing of Perrault's moment of critical favour more boldly than the vociferously negative response to *La bête lumineuse*. Released nearly two decades after the near-unanimous international praise accorded to *Pour la suite du monde* (which still held a sufficient spell over world critics to show up on a "Canada's Ten Best" poll conducted by the Toronto Festival of Festivals in 1984), the response elicited by Perrault's raunchy record of a booze-sodden, all-male hunting trip had as much to say about shifts in prevailing cultural and critical perspectives as it did about the film. Foremost among these is the sharp decline in critical favour suffered by the documentary as a realm of cinematic practice. When *Pour la suite du monde* appeared in 1963, certain developments in documentary practice (developments that were as



much technical as aesthetic or political) had elevated the mode to an unprecedented level of critical legitimacy. Unleashed smack in the middle of a revolution in documentary style and theory that was taking place simultaneously in Canada, Great Britain, France and the United States (and was variously referred to as direct cinema, *cinéma vérité*, candid-eye and free cinema), Perrault's first feature was seen as both a product of and a bold departure from the prevailing forms of *cinéma vérité*. Instead of subscribing to the common *vérité* ethos that more portable equipment should necessarily facilitate a more complete effacement of the filmmaker's presence in the pro-filmic event (and thus a closer approximation of a pristine, unmediated reality), Perrault saw in the new technology an opportunity to burrow right into the lives of his subjects. For his first feature, he not only lived among the hospitably tolerant islanders for months before shooting, he was instrumental in convincing them to revive the whale hunt that became the film's major dramatic element. Subsequently, his brazen, hands-on documentary style has evolved in a truly unique way, and one that more effectively disturbs the cozy distinction between fiction and documentary filmmaking than any other I can think of: Perrault films people acting on predetermined (if not scripted) scenarios, thus indulging in a degree of subject/filmmaker collaboration that contradicts almost every conventional conception of documentary form or philosophy. (To reiterate the timeworn ethical bugaboo vis-à-vis documentary: Does this practice make Perrault's films less honest or in fact *more*—given their frank admission that, by definition, filmmaking is a process that invariably involves such subjective processes as selection and reconstruction?)

The problem for Perrault is, documentary is an all but dead practice in contemporary critical terms. No longer holding out the formal or political promise of the heady *vérité* days,⁴ documentary has been consigned to inhabit television, still the most disdained and ignored of popular media. Thus the roving eye of critical attention has strayed far from documentary since Perrault first splashed down, and most contemporary critics not only couldn't be less interested in documentary, they probably no longer have the vocabulary necessary to address it.

Also instrumental in terms of the critical rejection of *La bête lumineuse* both in and outside of Québec is its depiction and conception of "québécois." Like all of Perrault's films that I have seen (and not many are available with subtitles), though less explicitly, it is concerned with the mapping out and recording of behaviour and speech that can be designated as distinctly québécois. This project⁵ has not only drawn Perrault consistently to particular archetypally québécois communities and lifestyles, it grants his subjects a mythic or iconographic status by enlisting them as elementary constituents of their country. With *La bête lumineuse*, this elementary Québécois has become a drunken, vulgar and bloodthirsty hunter, who preys upon animals and non-conforming humans with equal disregard to pain and suffering. While it's not difficult to understand why this image has been adamantly rejected by many of Perrault's countrymen and critics, it's worth pointing out that, even without the vulgarity and viciousness, the image would probably still rankle in contemporary Québec. As a pre-Quiet Revolution nationalist, Perrault sought to identify the distinctive Québécois identity in the country's oldest and most enduring traditions—thus the exhaustive account of dying *habitant* mores and traditions constituted by the Ile-aux-Coudres tri-

logy. With *La bête lumineuse*, Perrault is again drawn into both the past and the wilderness for his collective cultural archetype: the hunter, a figure in Québec history and culture that dates back to the very birthing of the country and the *courre des bois*. Today however, in post-referendum, post-PQ Québec, these traditional archetypes are viewed as regressive and nostalgic, if not downright embarrassing. They do not jibe with contemporary Québec's urban-cosmopolitan, Big O self-image.⁶ Furthermore, the current commercial cinema of the province, as exemplified by such slickly-stylized, culturally-neutralized films as *Anne Trister*, *Pouvoir Intime*, or the fabulously overrated *The Decline of the American Empire*, couldn't be further—in style or concern—from Perrault's rough-hewn rural vision.

But not even an understanding of the cultural and political factors that may have contributed to Perrault's descent from critical favour is sufficient to allow *La bête lumineuse* to stand on its own as a subject for analysis. For the anglophone viewer in particular, Perrault's films can be obstinately remote and incomprehensible. A sort of nationalistic, layman's Lacanian (if that isn't oxymoronic), Perrault has said he's interested in documenting the process whereby culture (in the collective national sense) is constituted and created through language. Thus the recording of language (less for its content than its form) is a central, indeed crucial element of Perrault's cinematic practice. Given this, two quite substantial problems immediately surface for the non-francophone: a dependence on subtitles for access to what's being spoken in the films (and no films, not even Eric Rohmer's, are talkier than Perrault's), and the general unreliability of those subtitles as an accurate vehicle for translation. This handicap is further aggravated by the particular inadequacy of subtitles when it comes to conveying the subtleties and distinguishing peculiarities of dialects and largely colloquial modes of speech—precisely the kinds of speech which Perrault is most keenly and consistently attracted to, and in which he sees the process of cultural reconstitution being most vitally played out. Yet for the non-French speaking viewer, subtitles must suffice—which introduces yet another obstacle altogether, considering that most of the films, at this writing, still don't exist in titled versions. Thankfully (and no doubt owing to its invitation to Cannes), *La bête lumineuse* does.

More word-related difficulties are posed by the director himself, who is rivalled only by the post-revolutionary soviets in his insistence on painstakingly documenting and disseminating the intellectual and aesthetic motivations for his films. A poet and journalist (and a disenchanted lawyer), Perrault is a veritable word-machine: nearly all of his films have been printed in heavily amended and addended script form, and almost no one has spilled as much ink over Perrault's intentions and achievements as Perrault himself. Obviously, this kind of authorial intervention can wedge itself in between the film and the viewer, making an unmediated reading of the film (to the extent that it's possible) damned difficult. Obviously, this is a more pressing consideration for the francophone student of Perrault's, as virtually none of his transcripts have been published in English, but it's a serious consideration nonetheless. The issue, in this case, isn't simply the protection of a specious critical assumption that a film must be studied as some kind of pristine, a-historical and pre-ideological text, but that Perrault's own interpretations of his films frequently don't mesh with what the films themselves convey. In other words, of foremost interest in Perrault's films (and this applies with singular acuity to *La bête lumineuse*), are not the director's voluminously documented intentions, but the gap that exists between what the films actually say and what Perrault says they say.⁷

OPPOSITE: Stéphane-Albert skins the rabbit.

The discrepancies between text (both the film's and Perrault's) and subtext are particularly illuminating in terms of *La bête lumineuse*, which the director obviously sees as a record of a kind of elementary québécois maleness, a contemporary account of the persistence in Québec culture of the hearty, simple and nation-building *coureur-des-bois* spirit.⁸ Not only have most of Perrault's films concentrated on the political dynamics of male groups (which, depending on your degree of cultural nationalism, makes him either Québec's Howard Hawks or Don Shebib English Canada's Pierre Perrault), his attraction to hunting and the wilderness are well-documented aspects of his public persona⁹—thus it's hard to imagine a more comfortable context for Perrault to indulge his collaborative documentary practice than among a group of male hunters.

This ease with the subject(s) of the film is everywhere apparent in *La bête lumineuse*. Shot mostly in the tight confines of a hunting cabin in le Michomie, Québec, the film betrays practically no camera-shyness at all on the part of the raucous participants. (Indeed, given the general level of hearty, drunken showboating that goes on, the camera probably just tickled a latent urge to perform). Typically with Perrault's practice, the participants of the film are composed of either already-close acquaintances (there are faces in *La bête lumineuse* that the director's cameras have studied before), or people with whom the director has spent much time living and talking before the cameras actually started to roll. But in no film has the intimacy between Perrault and his subjects been quite so fruitful or illuminating as it is in this film—if not, that is, in a way that may have accorded with Perrault's intentions. Quite simply, the isolation, intoxication and exclusive maleness of the group embolden particular persistent themes that, while always lurking on the peripheries of previous works, have never been quite so boldly foregrounded as they are here. While most other Perrault films have been conspicuous in their selective and quite deliberate banishment of women from the sphere of immediate concern and social influence, *La bête lumineuse* is the first that does away with women altogether—if they exist it's in abstract terms and to serve specific, gender-enforcing ends: either, that is, as subjects for derisive, male-bonding humour, or as vehicles for the homophobic humiliation of the weaker members of the group by the strong. Furthermore, while this film, like the others, takes the process whereby language constructs cultural identity as its principal concern, the use and function of language in *La bête lumineuse* acquires resonances that ripple far beyond what Perrault, if his writings are an accurate indication, was after in making it. True, the film is about the process whereby language constructs and enforces collective identity, but the identity enforced—and blatantly, obsessively so—throughout the film is much less culturally-specific (i.e. "québécois") than it is gender-specific (i.e. "male"). In other words, what this film is about, and what it documents (albeit inadvertently) with a thoroughness and rigor that has rarely, if ever, been evident in a documentary film before, is the process whereby individual, subjective masculinity is constructed and enforced by collective or social pressure. It's an account of how identity is determined by ideology.

Specifically, this account is rendered in terms of a demonstration (and an often disturbingly overdetermined one) of the social suppression of individual dissent. The opening sequences, showing two men talking in a marshy field (a conversation which, it subsequently becomes apparent, actually takes place *after* certain apocalyptic events in the cabin), introduce the characters who will embody the elementary

conflict of the film, and out of whom will grow *La bête lumineuse*'s veritable system of strategic oppositions: the poet-archer Stéphane-Albert Boulais, and the cook-rifleman Bernard L'Heureux (both "real" people—for whatever that's worth in the intensely-mediated documentary terms of Perrault). Boyhood friends, the two have obviously grown in radically different directions. Stéphane-Albert is a teacher with small children, a wine lover, and an incurably romantic aesthete given to spouting spontaneously-composed verse celebrating the natural grandeur of jerrybuilt tables and passing siamese cats. About to take what appears to be his first hunting trip (though this isn't spelled out—few circumstantial details ever are in Perrault—the poet's profound inexperience is soon made clear), Stéphane-Albert's mind and mouth fairly burst with poetic and philosophical wonder. Before departing, he and his friend Maurice Chaillot (who has played the symbolic intellectual for Perrault before, most notably in *Un pays sans bon sens!* in 1970) practice archery with the new, high-tech bows they will take on the hunt. For Stéphane-Albert, the act of archery and the hunt both have grandly poetic rationales. "Hunting," he muses aloud, "is basically an act of fertility." Archery is similarly mystical: "You have to find a corridor through space . . . the eye of the hurricane. The target's an illusion."

Stéphane-Albert's pre-hunt discussions with Maurice are crucial in terms of the film's dramatic and political trajectories: not only do they establish quite unequivocally who this man is and the ideological forces he represents, they also constitute the only occasion in the film during which Stéphane-Albert is *permitted* to express his views. Subsequently, in what will amount to an act of socially-contracted suppression among the other hunters, this man of flowery and abundant words will either not be allowed to speak at all, or he will be deliberately ignored when he does. There also appears in these early sequences an incident that will resound pathetically later on, once Stéphane-Albert's ritual humiliation by the other hunters has apparently finished. Speaking to Maurice about his feelings for his boyhood friend Bernard (who always made Stéphane-Albert, the Zen-archer, play Indian to Bernard's Cowboy when they were children), the poet breaks into heavy sobs: "I love him." Comforting his friend, Maurice makes a comment that ominously hints at the motivations for Stéphane-Albert's later suffering at the hands of the hunters (and anticipates the shedding of many more tears further on): "I think poets just love a good cry."

The introduction of Bernard, the source of Stéphane-Albert's tears and the final spokesperson for the forces that prevent the poet from speaking, is conspicuously different from the introduction of either Stéphane-Albert or the others on the hunt. While Bernard does appear in the marsh at the very outset, intoning to Stéphane-Albert about the laws of the figurative wolfpack (a scene which chronologically follows the actual execution of those laws, and thus follows Stéphane-Albert's ordeal) which the poet has invoked with his stubborn dissent, Perrault keeps him at a strategic distance until well after the film is under way. Apart from the marsh sequences (which frame the film fore and aft), Bernard only appears in brief shots, frequently posed with his rifle, and usually as he is being longingly spoken about by Stéphane-Albert to Maurice. The cumulative effect—particularly as it so strongly contrasts with the early presentation of the bumblingly earnest Stéphane-Albert preparing for the trip—is that of a mysterious, elusive, efficient and powerful figure. This 'privileging' of the figure of Bernard, as someone who occupies a near-mythic plane, will be maintained throughout the film: Even after the lines have been



La Bête Lumineuse: Stéphane-Albert with bow and arrow.

drawn, and Stéphane-Albert is enduring the full brunt of aggressive ostracization from the male pack, Bernard is presented as simultaneously of and above the collective he speaks for (and, it could well be argued, leads). Though he clearly endorses the vicious behaviour of his cronies towards his childhood friend (and one of the first things we hear him say to Stéphane-Albert is "It was your turn to get jumped on . . . you don't understand the system."), Bernard is usually on the periphery of the main events, taking everything in as he prepares a seemingly neverending round of bacchanalian feasts, but rarely speaking until directly provoked.

While the director's intentions in so distancing Bernard are doubtlessly motivated by a desire to present him as a kind of *über-québécois*, and written evidence would suggest the poet-director's sympathies are probably aligned *against* the poet-hunter (which imbues the film with downright tantalizing psychoanalytical potential), part of the general critical and public confusion and/or hostility to *La bête lumineuse* must be attributed to this troubling representation of Bernard: in terms of most conventional moral schema (and certainly those of most conventional movies), Bernard comes across as a callous, uncaring creep—it is difficult, if not impossible, not to hate him while watching the film. Stéphane-Albert, presumably Perrault's symbol for an overintellectualized, de-naturalized urban Québécois, who is supposed to deserve what he gets from the pack, is on the other hand almost completely sympathetic. Pathetic and naive perhaps, but certainly not deserving of what he gets.

Further confusing the issue, or at least the issue as appar-

ently intended by Perrault—i.e., the ritualized purging of certain modern attitudes and modes of thinking that have weakened Québec's links to its virile, wilderness origins—are subtextual concerns that constantly bubble over and flood the ostensible concerns. Thus, as an exercise in metaphoric political criticism, *La bête lumineuse* is actually far less coherent than it is an illustration of the processes of ideological indoctrination and regulation. For this (admittedly non-francophone, non-québécois) viewer, in fact, the *only* way to make sense of *La bête lumineuse* (which climaxes with the confrontation between Stéphane-Albert and Bernard over the latter's rejection of the love poem Stéphane-Albert has written) is constantly rippled by mildly disorienting disturbances: while there is a dramatic logic to its structure, it's often difficult to keep abreast of the chronology of the film's sequences—a problem that is frequently aggravated by Perrault's distinctly non-documentary practice of using 'flashbacks' (i.e., two men recall a canoeing mishap, while the incident is shown onscreen in a montage of still photographs) to illustrate what people are talking about. Furthermore, while the core group of prominent characters (who, besides Bernard and Stéphane-Albert include the cruelly witty Nicky, Stéphane-Albert's cousin Philippe, the stetson-topped Michel and the virtually mute native guide Barney) remains relatively fixed, the make-up of the peripheral participants constantly shifts and fluctuates: Maurice, for example, who figures prominently in the film's first half, drops out of sight for the final showdown—as does Michel—and new faces can constantly be seen among the men in the cabin. The cumula-

tive effect is a near-constant dislodging of *La bête lumineuse* from any strictly-categorized generic position: while the incidents depicted, and their chronological arrangement, have the causal trajectory and dramatic logic of fiction, the constant surface disruptions are permanent reminders of the spontaneous, happenstance nature of documentary. What this disorienting generic slipperiness facilitates, in terms of this reading of the film's principal project, is reinforcement: a naturalization, through the seemingly unmediated conventions of documentary, of the ideologically-determined nature of proper socio-sexual behaviour. One of the most effective modes available for the dissemination of ideological conformity (and nowhere is this more apparent than in the conventions of TV news and current affairs), the social power of documentary lies in its ability to convey relative and wholly-constructed values in seemingly 'objective' terms.

But in documentary this process of reinforcement usually works both ways, which means that the system of ideological hegemony apparent in *La bête lumineuse* (which is constantly buoyed by the authority of unmediated "reality") is itself constantly being questioned. Far from effectively encouraging us to accept the ostracization and humiliation of Stéphane-Albert for his unconventional behaviour and thinking, the film's apparent real-life rawness makes us horrified at, and more critical of, the system that's meting out the punishment. While a fictional playing out of the same ritual (see, for example, John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972), in which the similarly urban-feminine character of Jon Voight is made more acceptably macho on another blood-ritual hunting trip) can quite effectively disseminate cautionary conventional ideology transparently, documentary is too susceptible to the intrusion of unforeseen variables—variables that can throw up quite substantial obstacles to the unhindered operation of ideological hegemony.

It's precisely the intrusion of such variables that allows *La bête lumineuse* to function more effectively as a critique of enforced conformity than a cautionary endorsement of it. Perhaps the most significant is the appearance and manner of the two principal antagonists, Bernard and Stéphane-Albert. While a fictional treatment of the same ideological showdown could be cast according to established personas and popular perceptions (as *Deliverance* was, opposing a boyishly gelid Jon Voight against an assuredly virile Burt Reynolds), Bernard and Stéphane-Albert are doomed to be more or less themselves, and this skews our sympathies sufficiently to disrupt the film's smooth operation as a cautionary call to a particular kind of conformity. For, as they play themselves, the gregariously naive and openly emotional Stéphane-Albert is far more attractive and sympathetic than the sullenly withdrawn (and often blind drunk) Bernard.

This alignment of sympathies also establishes a critical relationship between the film's ideological project and the viewer that might not have developed if Bernard were more attractive and Stéphane-Albert less. In feeling sorry for him, that is, we are more aware not only of how much unmotivated punishment Stéphane-Albert must endure, but of the forms that punishment takes. What may have seemed a random ritual of social Darwinism becomes a quite explicit and specific one: the aim of the collective is to harangue and chastise the dissenter, either until he comes around or gives up in humiliation. (For Stéphane-Albert, this means, among other things, enduring a host of boy's camp pranks: being forced to skin a rabbit, being made to collect water from a swamp, being tricked by Bernard and Michel into believing he's about to bag a moose, and being soaked with water in his sleep.)

In *La bête lumineuse*, not only are the aims of the collective

quite specifically mapped out, so is the means of their enforcement. And this is finally the most impressive, valuable and unprecedented achievement of this remarkable film: the demonstration of how language acts as an enforcer of dominant ideology. Throughout, words are deployed in specifically political ways. Characters are designated according to both the words they use and the way they use them. While the men speak always for the group, and usually in the form of jokes and reminiscences that require a social contract to have any communicative value at all (they speak, in other words, in modes that require both an audience and the assumption of shared experiences with that audience), Stéphane-Albert uses language to assert his individuality. Language, for Stéphane-Albert, is a tool for carving one's subjective experience out of the collective consciousness, while for the pack of hunters it is a social cement: the adhesive which binds dominant social groups together. For the group the operative expression of subjectivity is "we," for the poet Stéphane-Albert, it is "I."

This demonstration of the hegemonically-regulating operations of language is remarkably thorough. Quite unequivocally, language is what separates Stéphane-Albert from his tormentors, and this is conveyed both implicitly and explicitly throughout the film. *La bête lumineuse* fairly rocks with laughter, and each burst constitutes another assertion of the group's dominance over the dissenting individual: almost always, the laughter the group enjoys comes at Stéphane-Albert's expense. On the few occasions when he is allowed to tell a joke or speak up, he either laughs alone or is laughed at. But, for the most part—and it is in this regard that the actual concerns of *La bête lumineuse* becomes most explicit—Stéphane-Albert is simply not allowed to speak, or he is ignored. On a number of occasions, the poet's words are quite violently rejected by the pack of hunters. In one scene, Stéphane-Albert tries vainly to get the drunken Bernard and Michel (who, during the day's hunt, fooled him into believing they were a moose) to sit down in the cabin and *listen* to him. Instead they do anything—including wiping a dirty nose on his shirt—to deflect attention from what Stéphane-Albert is trying to say. Similarly, during the climactic sequence in which a drunken Stéphane-Albert pathetically tries to get Bernard to listen to the love poem he has written for his boyhood friend ("I am aching to speak, Bernard!"), the connection between language and power—and the powerlessness of language without listeners—is made astonishingly clear. Bernard insists on completely ignoring the pleading Stéphane-Albert ("Bernard, just *listen to me!*"), while Philippe, the poet's cousin, articulates the film's implicit thematic by trying to spell out for a distraught and baffled Stéphane-Albert (who simply doesn't get it) the connections between power, language and the hunt: "The art of hunting a moose is silence—*Not saying a fucking word.*" Stéphane-Albert (endearingly incurable dissenter that he proves himself to be) nevertheless forges ahead with his doomed project, and reads his love poem to Bernard aloud. Having finished the verse (which is often explicitly sexual, and refers to Bernard as "the sharer of orgasms . . . who fathoms the pulse of love"), the poet bursts into tears and runs from the cabin. Shortly thereafter, the petulantly ungrateful Bernard refuses the homoerotic-attraction made public by the reading of the poem with the suggestion (not altogether inappropriate, given the nature of Stéphane-Albert's transgression) that Stéphane-Albert take the poem and shove it.

The distinction of *La bête lumineuse* as a subversive text (albeit a probably inadvertent one) lies in the explicitness with which it illustrates both the limits of conventional social tolerance (specifically, the limits of acceptable male behav-

iour), and the means whereby transgressions of those limits are regulated and punished. Stéphane-Albert, the unrepentantly individualistic man of flowery words and homoerotic impulses, is a particularly threatening emblem of what real men aren't supposed to be or do, and his presence among this group of ultra-traditional men mobilizes an illuminating and intriguingly overdetermined campaign of collective suppression and ridicule. Ultimately, despite the depressing cruelty of the spectacle at hand, this rabid social response must be interpreted as positive—as anything which so profoundly rankles the calm surface of conservative ideology must. Equally positive is the final impression Perrault leaves us of Stéphane-Albert. Despite the pain and humiliation of his ordeal, despite the explicitness with which his violations of the male social contract were finally spelled out (a clarity he forced by pushing the group much further than they probably anticipated he ever would), the poet still seems rather doggedly oblivious to his crimes at the film's end. In the last moments of *La bête lumineuse*, sitting with his old friend in the marsh, Stéphane-Albert asks Bernard why *he* was selected to be the moose on this trip.

"Why?" responds Bernard. "Because you wouldn't join the wolves. I mean you *chose* not to join. At some point you refused to conform to . . . to . . . a law that's unspoken, but even so, it exists."

Responds Stéphane-Albert, with a look and tone of honest incredulity that can only leave one assured that, given the chance, he'd endure everything all over again, "What law?" □

Footnotes

1. Many of the ideas expressed in this essay were influenced and suggested by an undergraduate paper written by Claire L. Davey for Prof. Peter

Harcourt at Carleton University in 1984, titled "Pierre Perrault and *La politique de parole*: A Look at the Politics of Speech in *La bête lumineuse*." For her gracious permission to amend and plunder, I am indebted.

2. All quotes taken from the film are direct transcriptions from the subtitles. Unfortunately these may occasionally stray in meaning from the dialogue on the soundtrack they translate.
3. Quoted from "Direct Cinema," by Michel Euvrard and Pierre Verroneau. Available in English translation in *Self-Portrait: Essays on the Canadian and Quebec Cinemas* (Ottawa: The Canadian Film Institute, 1980), pp. 77-93.
4. A promise which probably had as much to do with the political optimism and popular activism of the day as it did with the ambitions of *vérité* documentary filmmakers themselves. During his visit to Toronto last fall, I asked Don Pennebaker, a key figure of the American *vérité* movement, why he thought the movement never realized its political ambitions. "What ambitions?", he replied. "We never *had* any ambitions. Most of the time, we didn't know what we were doing. Those ambitions may have existed, but they weren't ours. They were imposed on us."
5. David Clandfield's excellent article, "Ritual and Recital: The Perrault Project" (included in *Take Two*, edited by Seth Feldman and published by Irwin), offers a fascinating account of the both the linguistic determinants of Perrault's cinema, and an assessment of the films as works of cultural anthropology.
6. See Euvrard and Verroneau.
7. For Perrault's account of this film, see *La bête lumineuse* (Montreal: Editions Nouvelles Optique, 1982). Available in French only.
8. Op. cit.
9. As if to establish this, the recent documentary on Perrault, *Les traces du rêve*, begins with a haunting telephoto shot of Perrault's hulking, snowshoed figure crashing through wintery underbrush, clutching a shotgun and panting heavily. His somewhat paradoxical reputation for reclusiveness—given his cultural status and mastery of several media—is also bolstered by this more-or-less constant conflation of Perrault with the Québec wilderness.

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Drums Along the Mohawk

by Robin Wood

DRUMS ALONG THE MOHAWK IS GENERALLY the least valued of the three films Ford made in 1939, and perhaps the finest. It also offers one of the completest elaborations in the classical Hollywood cinema of a positively conceived ideology of America—an ideology artistically validated within the workings of the film by the intensity of Ford's commitment to it, whatever we may think of it politically. (*Outside* the film, one doesn't have to look far to find its ideological position qualified within Ford's own work: its juxtaposition with *Stagecoach* in itself raises ideological contradictions that Ford never really resolved.)

The film is based on a novel which in its turn is based on historical events; the novel distorts history, the film distorts the novel; the only 'historical' figure to survive the transitions is General Herkimer. The film must be read as dramatic poem rather than as historical reconstruction: its thematic-ideological concerns take precedence at all points over historical accuracy. It is perfectly conceived for (or a perfectly logical

product of) its contemporary historical moment: America just emerging from the Depression; the world on the brink of a war to defend Democracy against Fascism. The film shows the America people (in microcosm) struggling against hardship and disaster, overcoming them, and preparing for new effort (the last line of dialogue is Fonda's "We'd better get back to work—there's goin' to be a heap of things to do from now on").

Structuring the film are two ideological assumptions which are never overtly questioned (if they are felt to be implicitly questioned, this is from the sense—doubtless much stronger in 1987 than in 1939—of the suppressions and distortions that the film's affirmation necessitates): the rightness of white democratic-capitalist civilisation, hence of 'settling' (a homely, personalized version of imperialism), hence of subjugating or exterminating the Indians; the goodness of monogamy/family as the repository of virtue and civilisation's basic unit and foundation. We can trace in some detail the way the film develops and continuously connects these two projects.

Its essential progress can be seen in terms of widening circles, of a process whereby smaller units become incorporated in larger units without losing their identity (rather, having their identity more clearly defined and strengthened). Before the film begins, the *individual*, Gil Martin/Henry Fonda, has gone into the wilderness and built a log cabin. The first scene shows his wedding to Lana Borst/Claudette Colbert and their departure for the wilderness. In the course of the film, the *couple* becomes a *family*, and we see the family become integrated in the *community*. The final sequence, centred on the carrying in of the new American flag, shows the community recognizing itself as part of a newly-founded *nation*.

The linearity of this process is offset by the repeated establishing of links between the units: the film wants to assert that each—individual, family, community—retains its own integrity, its own character, even while it is assimilated into a larger structure, as well as that the larger structure depends upon the dedication and loyalty of its units. Lana's first (unsuccessful) pregnancy is announced during the couple's introduction to the fort community. When her second child is born, it is greeted as a *communal* child ("We've got a baby boy"). The Hallowe'en dance (the film's central, and quintessentially Fordian, celebration of community) also celebrates a new wedding; Gil leaves the dance to watch his sleeping son, Lana leaves to watch him watching ("Please God, let this go on forever"). The last scene, triumphantly extending the idea of community to multi-racial democracy, links Lana with the new flag ("It's a pretty flag, isn't it?"). In the course of the film, her clothing subtly acquires red, white and blue, but only in the last scene are the three colours united in her dress and bonnet; in one shot, Lana (left of screen) is compositionally balanced with the flag (right of screen).

The centrality of Woman—of a certain concept of Woman—to Ford's view of civilisation is epitomized by this moment. Woman for Ford is at once the pretext for civilisation (the cabin is built for her) and (as wife and mother) the guarantee of its continuity. And he characteristically endows his women with the finest attributes: strength, fortitude, integrity, nobility. The price of this is of course that their role remains at bottom firmly 'traditional,' whatever apparent deviations the films produce. A central concern of *Drums* is the education of Lana as frontierswoman (rather as a central concern of *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* 10 years later will be the education of Olivia Dandridge as cavalry wife). In the course of this, Lana must learn to be able to do man's work (stacking corn with Gil) and take on certain 'masculine' attributes—culminating in her donning of a uniform and shooting an Indian with a rifle. Yet the overlay of 'manliness' serves mainly to emphasize Lana's 'natural' femininity: the corn-stacking scene stresses Gil's concern over the blisters on her pretty hands, a point taken up later in the beautiful moment where Mrs. McClellan/Edna May Oliver, inspecting Lana's hands to see if she's suitable as hired help, nods and smiles with approval—the approval being, clearly, for both the hands' natural delicacy and the callouses. When Hawks' women (already possessing 'masculine' attributes of aggressiveness, dominance, etc.) put on men's clothes there is always a strong suggestion of potential androgyny; Lana is never more feminine than when wearing uniform (a point stressed by her very un-Hawksian faint at the foot of the ladder when Gil leaves to get reinforcements): when she shoots the Indian at close quarters, she inflicts no more than a light wound.

Lana is one of Ford's 'girls from the East' (a figure variously inflected in the Lucy Mallory of *Stagecoach*, the Clementine Carter of *My Darling Clementine*, the Olivia Dandridge of *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*). The figure is always viewed with a

degree of ambivalence: on the one hand, she is seen as bringing to the West a superior refinement, a cultivated sensibility; on the other, she is admired according to her ability to transcend all that. Even Clementine Carter (whose refinement, expressed through her manners and her clothes, seems unambiguously valued throughout the film) is valued even more when she discards the fine clothes and Boston bonnet of the Easterner for the simple print dress and loose hair of the Western school-teacher. One might argue that what is discarded is merely the external accoutrements of refinement—that the 'cultivated sensibility' survives the changes of clothes. Yet it is not clear that Ford sees the source of the qualities he admires to lie in 'civilisation': rather, he appears to regard them as natural, overlaid rather than created by 'culture.' The foil for Lana throughout *Drums* is the snobbish and affected Mrs. Demooth, who is castigated by the film for her failure to cast off the manners and attitudes of the East. The problem—uncertainty as to exactly what value is being placed on 'superior refinement'—is quite central to Ford's work, to its paradoxes and contradictions.

As 'girl from the East' who becomes frontierswoman, Lana is at the centre of the interplay throughout the film between the 'natural' and the 'civilized.' She is connected (through her established family and Dutch ancestry) not only to the developed civilisation of New England but to the Old World; thus her integration into the growing community/new nation epitomizes the movie's aspirations to 'creating' an America that is inclusive, assimilating the finest from all the available sources. The opening scene stresses the formality and order of an advanced civilisation: its first image is a close-up of Lana's tightly-packed, intricately composed bridal bouquet; during the ceremony, bride and groom are neatly and symmetrically framed by the arched windows behind them; a similar arched window frames Lana as she throws the bouquet from the staircase. The first shots outside the house reveal the honeymoon vehicle: a covered wagon with a cow tied on behind. The movement from culture into nature is beautifully expressed in a single composition: in the mid foreground, square to the camera, two low walls defining the bounds of the estate, on either side of the gateway to the wilderness; beyond them, the covered wagon moving off between the ranks of trees; beyond that, virgin forest. The same movement is marked by the progression of fertility images: the tight, formal bridal bouquet; the loose bunch of flowers tied round the neck of the cow behind the wagon; subsequently, the corn that Gil and Lana stack together.

The opening sequence is an exemplary instance of the masking of ideology beneath the personalization of realist fiction. What we see—economically and touchingly presented—is a young couple bravely venturing into the wilderness to build civilisation; the political reality this conceals is no less than American imperialism, the seizing of land as private property, the extermination of the Indians. All this is sanctioned and dignified by nature (the cycle of the generations) and religion ("It's the way it's been since Bible days," says the clergyman, comforting Lana's weeping mother—the American wilderness becomes the Promised Land, the subjugation of the Indians is validated not only by Manifest Destiny but by Divine Ordinance).

The film's attitude to civilisation and its relationship to the 'natural' is further defined in the scene where Lana shows her home to the women from the fort—specifically, through two emblems, the pheasant's feather and the white china teapot. Part of the significance of the former is its uselessness—its value is purely as object-of-beauty, it is *pure* emblem. Crucially, both are linked to the idea of transmission: of the feather, Lana remarks that her mother told her that there are

times when such things are more important than bread; the teapot belonged to her grandmother. Both carry connotations beyond the aesthetic: the feather, though removed from its natural context, is a product of nature rather than art, the teapot is as much for use as ornament. Mrs. Demooth's reactions are used to define the significance of both: of the feather she remarks that they had a lot of them at home and threw them out because they gathered dust; the teapot elicits the reaction, "We always ate off Wedgwood." Against the use of artifacts to establish prestige and superiority is set Lana's quiet pride in her possessions as links with home and the past: the scene embodies those notions of tradition and continuity so dear to Ford and linked again to the notion of woman as transmitter.

The interplay between nature and civilisation is inherent in Ford's visual style, centred on 'composition,' the one artistic ability on which he prided himself ("... the only thing I always had was an eye for composition—I don't know where I got it—and that's all I did have"—from the Peter Bogdanovich interview). Ford "got it" from the whole tradition of 'realist' painting since the Renaissance (but especially from 19th century Romanticism and its extension into photography): one of the main functions of 'composition' in *Drums Along the Mohawk* is the conversion of nature into works of art. Especially, of course, man-in-nature: Ford almost never uses landscapes *solely* for their pictorial beauty, but rather for the dignity they confer upon the meticulously placed human beings. One might contrast the compositions of Anthony Mann, which habitually present man at odds with nature. Ford's allegiance to the past, his rootedness in a tradition that by 1939 was already obsolete, is expressed above all in his compositional sense, perhaps the last distinguished manifestation of the Romantic vision of a possible harmony between nature and humanity (as against what one might loosely call the Existentialist vision, variously inflected in the work of Boetticher and Mann, of nature as apathetic or hostile). Nature, in the landscapes of *Drums*, becomes the ultimate validation of settling, of home, of monogamy/family: the couple, the cabin, the corn-stacks, surrounded by virgin forest, in compositions whose every component has its precise, harmonious place.

The point must not, however, be allowed to stand without qualification: the sense of harmony and wholeness is everywhere counterpointed with a sense of transience (the cabin and crops are destroyed, the white china teapot smashed; Lana's "Please God, let this go on forever" is immediately followed, in terms of screen time, by the next Indian uprising) and loss (actual or potential). This in itself scarcely threatens the film's ideological position (the Romantic view of man-in-nature has never precluded a sense of the tragic); rather, it adds depth and complexity within it. The scene of Gil's departure with the militia (one of the film's great set pieces) is a fine example. Mrs. McClellan's farewell links Gil to her dead husband Barny (she gives him Barny's whiskey flask and kisses him before Lana does, so that "you won't go off with the taste of a widow in your mouth"). As Lana runs across the stream and over the hillside to watch the men march away, the compositions (with their characteristic depth-of-field), besides ennobling the scene with a traditional beauty, have the function of showing, within the same frame, the ever-widening distance between the women and the men. Crucial to the scene's poignance and sense of the precarious is Gil's failure to see Lana—he keeps looking back to the house, she is running across the hill, and her desperate efforts to remain in sight as long as possible go unnoticed.

This continual counterpointing of affirmation and loss

makes it less paradoxical that the film should use Mrs. McClellan, a childless widow, to uphold its monogamy/family ideology. What is stressed repeatedly is her fidelity to Barny: "When Barny kissed you, you stayed kissed," as she tells Ward Bond at the Hallowe'en party, denying the potency of the film's one really erotic embrace. The fidelity extends, obsessively, to the marital bed, whose preservation becomes her main concern when three Indians infiltrate her home. Her cry to Barny as she dies is ambiguous—either she believes she is nearing him, or, frightened, she feels the need for his (and only his) protection: either reading underlines the film's sense of the naturalness and grandeur of the marriage union. Implicitly, she 'adopts' Gil and Lana as her children, seeing in them a replica of Barny and herself: she presents Gil with Barny's flask, and later with the crib that one of Barny's soldiers made for the child she never had. The film holds up for our admiration her strength, stoicism and resilience (the character is among Ford's most vivid and endearing creations) but all these are related to her fidelity to her dead husband and non-existent family. One feels, indeed, that, with her aggressive 'manliness' and ready acceptance of the man's work on the farm, she has kept Barny alive by *becoming* him.

According to Freud, a society built on monogamy and family is inherently repressive: there will be a great amount of surplus (basically sexual) energy for which an outlet will have to be found. In Ford's work, the commitment to traditional values goes with a continuous preoccupation with the ways in which surplus energy can be safely contained: work, communal celebrations, harmless (if often very violent) horseplay. The Independence Day celebration sequences of *Young Mr. Lincoln* exemplify this, and also the accompanying sense of the precariousness of the containment: the parade, with the 'comic' violence when a boy catapults a horse, the tug-o'-war and log-splitting, the bonfire; but also the fight and the murder outside the circle of the community.

The sense of coherence and wholeness which *Drums Along the Mohawk* communicates (despite its emphasis on horror, hardship, struggle and loss) is partly accountable for in terms of its success in suggesting the possibility of such containment within the community, and the projection of that-which-cannot-be-contained on to forces regarded as purely external. The film is rich in scenes of purposeful communal activity—scenes whose vividness and vitality testify to the strength of Ford's response: the drilling of the militia, the land-clearing, the Hallowe'en dance. The traditional account of Ford's development—a progress from affirmation to disillusionment—is highly questionable: beside *Drums* one has to set other films from the same period (*Stagecoach*, *The Long Voyage Home*, *Tobacco Road*) whose tone is very different. In fact, the central Fordian paradox is already implicit in *Drums*: his dedication to the development of a civilisation that will inevitably render obsolete the very values he celebrates. The ideal Fordian community (the concept embodied very precisely in the communal dances of *Drums*, *Clementine* and *Wagonmaster*) is by definition transient because it can only exist at an early stage of the development which gives it its motivation: the church must perpetually remain unroofed, the pioneers must be forever moving towards the Promised Land, there must always be "a heap of things to do from now on." That the affirmation of *Drums* is as convincing and moving as it is certainly has something to do with the period in which it was made (even by the time of *Wagonmaster* similar attempts at affirmation have become forced and artificial, without any

OPPOSITE: Above—*Drums Along the Mohawk*: Hallowe'en. Below—"Honeymooners".



convincing social context). It has more to do, however, with the period in which it is set: of all Ford's films about America, it is the earliest in history, crucially with the Civil War not even a remote threat.

IT WILL HAVE BEEN NOTICED THAT THIS account of the film so far has scrupulously avoided all of its problems—all those aspects that seriously qualify (without completely destroying) its 'affirmation' and 'coherence,' elements which threaten and disturb the secure functioning of its ideology. The problems can be located in three minor characters, though their ultimate source is the Indians. Of the three, the parson (Arthur Shields) is the most nearly assimilable into the film's coherence and the least necessary to its narrative: he contributes nothing essential to the plot development, and is clearly in the film to lend colour to the life at the fort and to add the support of religion to the notion of community solidarity. The disturbance arises from the character's excessiveness—what makes him 'colourful' also makes him monstrous.

The church service is treated primarily as comedy (Ford's view of religion is strongly rooted in his sense of the desirability of social cohesion; it has little of the transcendental or metaphysical; when his material forces this upon him—as in *The Fugitive*—he becomes rhetorical and pretentious). Yet it bears serious consideration, linking in the space of seconds sexual repressiveness, social prejudice, capitalism and militarism within the sanction of the Christian church. The parson calls for the congregation's prayers on three counts: a. for a girl who is keeping company with a Massachusetts man ("... and Thou knowest no good can come of that"); b. for a storekeeper with 'the flux,' this leading directly into a commercial for his newly arrived goods; c. for the wrath of God to fall upon the enemy (the British, but more specifically the insurgent Indians). The fundamental inherent contradiction in the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition is dramatized in the parson, who vigorously invokes 'Jehovah, God of battles' against the 'sons of Belial,' then collapses after the siege in a state of shock because "I killed a man." The "man," however, is presumably old Joe/Francis Ford, whom the parson shot as an act of mercy when the 'sons of Belial' were about to burn him alive; we have seen him also shoot numerous Indians. The film never fully confronts the implications of this, and its attitude to the parson remains equivocal: by making him comic and quaint, it manages neither to endorse nor reject him.

This leads conveniently to a consideration of the role of the Indians in the film, and of its other two problematic characters Caldwell and Blueback. If 'nature' is settling, monogamy, family, home, farming the land, it is also, in a more obvious sense, the Indians: see, for example, their beautiful and ominous first appearance where they emerge out of the hazily sunlit woods as if a direct emanation from nature. In its treatment of the Indians (as in, for example, its definition of the role of women) the film can always claim for itself the alibi of historical accuracy: we are after all, in 1776, and the view of the Indians as "sons of Belial," "painted heathen devils," etc., closely reproduces the opinion of the founding fathers of modern, white America. Yet the plea of 'historical accuracy' is at best threadbare—the film is accurate only at its own convenience, and mythologizes history at every point.

The Puritan view of the Indians (as historically documented) has two aspects that are directly relevant here. First, they were literally devils, or, at least children of the devil; second, they were sexually unrestrained and promiscuous.

The two go, of course, inseparably together: the close association (almost identity) of Indians/devils/free sexuality is central to the meaning of the Hallowe'en dance, with its 'demon' lanterns made out of pumpkins (one of them teasingly juxtaposed with the grinning head of Francis Ford, whose younger brother's ambivalence of attitude seems encapsulated in that one image). The dance is the supreme expression in the film of the socialized and sanctioned release of energy—which is to say, the *containment* of energy; it juxtaposes the new monogamous union and the Gil/Lana/baby family with the sense that 'devils' can be contained, made harmless and humourous, even while their presence is acknowledged. Yet the 'devils' of the Halloween dance return as the Indians. The Puritan view can of course be easily interpreted in the light of Freud's theory of projection: what is repressed (but still obstinately continues to exist in the unconscious, perpetually ready to erupt and wreak its revenge) is projected on to some 'other' in order to be effectively disowned and condemned. The Indians had to be destroyed because (for the Puritans) they embodied precisely those drives which were forbidden—which must not even be allowed access to consciousness. The point is acknowledged in one of the film's 'comic' moments: awaiting the Indian attack, on the fort's parapet, the parson forces Christian Reall to throw away his jar of liquor (his excuse for drinking it is to keep it from the Indians) telling him to "Beware the heathen within thine own breast": the threat the Indians represent is not merely external.

The association of the Indians with the return of repressed sexual energies is fairly consistent in Ford's work (and not only in his); it reaches its fullest elaboration in *The Searchers*. The simplest, most explicit form it takes is the dread of miscegenation, the fear that women will be killed by the Indians seeming surpassed by the fear that they will be sexually defiled by them: thus Hatfield in *Stagecoach* saves his last bullet for the head of Lucy Mallory. But the unconscious of *Drums Along the Mohawk* (for the unconscious thinks too, in its own way) is haunted by more subtle linkages.

What makes Caldwell/John Carradine problematic is his mysteriousness. Without any basis in historical fact, he is given only the vaguest political explanation which the potency of his 'image' in the film completely transcends. The film needs him to make plausible one of its contradictory myths about the Indians—that they were helpless misguided children who would have done no harm had it not been for the use made of them by unscrupulous Tories. He is linked to the Indians throughout as the force that organizes and directs them; his potency is suggested by the strength and suggestive beauty of certain compositions, notably the shot following the drilling of the newly-recruited militia: a sudden cut to long-shot, the men dwindled to distant midgets, the foreground dominated by Caldwell watching from the darkness of the trees, hand on hip so that his black cape is spread out as if to swallow up the suddenly vulnerable tiny marching figures. Caldwell derives in fact less from history than from fiction and other movies: from romantic melodrama (with his eyepatch and cape he immediately evokes the highwayman); from the horror film (the figure emerging from the darkness, connected on his first appearance with flames, the cape giving him in this context connotations of the vampire). Both source-figures carry strong associations of sexual threat.

Caldwell is introduced on the word "Honeymooners"—the landlord of the inn pointing out to him the virginal Gil and Lana. He crosses to their table and immediately starts talking about the possibility of an Indian uprising in the Mohawk valley. He then precedes the young couple up the stairs to the bedchambers, whereupon the landlord, speculating about his



Drums Along the Mohawk: the farewell.

eyepatch, suggests that he lost an eye looking into things he had no business looking into. Lana looks uneasy; Gil asks her if the talk of Indians scared her; as they mount the stairs towards their bedroom she replies, "I wasn't thinking about the Indians."

Blueback is linked to Caldwell through the structure of the scenes: Gil and Lana arrive at the inn, Caldwell emerges out of the darkness as threat; they arrive at the cabin, Blueback emerges out of the darkness (and, now, the storm) as threat. The horror film connotations are much stronger here: the log cabin, approached through dark woods to the accompaniment of rain, thunder and lightning, becomes the Old Dark House. Blueback, appearing as if supernaturally in a flash of lightning, photographed from a low angle, is almost the Frankenstein monster. Lana collapses into hysteria, flees across the room, and cowers on the bed as Blueback advances: the notion of the Indian as specifically sexual threat is very clear.

Yet the film insists, of course, that Blueback is not a *real* threat: he is the safe, friendly, well-intentioned Christianized Indian who has only come to deliver half a deer. He is the film's desperate attempt to solve the Indian problem—its uneasy acknowledgement that the "sons of Belial" may perhaps be human beings after all and therefore deserving of a solution other than total extermination. The film tries to give Blueback dignity (significantly, in the salute of the flag in the final sequence), but the ignominy of his situation (belonging to neither the white nor the Indian culture—though the latter is not really permitted an existence) keeps manifesting itself. He *has* to be a comic character—the film could not sustain a serious consideration of his position. In the interests of authenticity, Ford cast a real Indian (Chief Big Tree) in the

role—with results quite beyond the film's control. The actor's painful, laborious delivery of every line and gesture imposed on him becomes expressive in a way scarcely containable within the fiction: one is uncomfortably aware at every point of the forcing on him of white man's language and the whole white notion of 'performance,' a tradition apparently quite alien to Indian culture. (The ignominy extends entirely beyond the diegesis: in the final castlist Chief Big Tree's name appears below those of numerous white bit-part players with roles far smaller than his). The film cannot conceal the awkwardness of Blueback's position in white civilisation, in it without belonging to it. Significantly, though the dialogue suggests that he is experienced with women, the film can allow him no sex-life, no home. With the one exception of the drinking bout in an outhouse during the childbirth sequence, he appears completely isolated; even in church he remains an anomaly and a disturbance, retaining vestiges of independence (the insistence on wearing a hat), hopefully calling out "Hallelujah!" at inappropriate moments. One of the film's most embarrassing moments is his warning cry that interrupts the communal land-clearing, "Indians on the warpath"—as if he himself wasn't one. The film can't explain how one of the "heathen devils" became Blueback—he has to be kept totally isolated from them, an anomaly everywhere, hence no more than the merest token 'answer' to the Indian problem.

Again, the film can hide behind the alibi of historical accuracy: his dress, style of hair, etc., identify Blueback as belonging to a different tribe (the distinction corresponds to the traditional Cheyenne/Apache opposition common in Hollywood films—see, for example, *Stagecoach*, which produces its Blueback figure in the first few minutes as a contrast to

Geronimo). Such a distinction, whatever claims it may have to 'authenticity,' can scarcely be free from its own brand of mythologizing; in the present instance, it seems to me completely over-ridden by the film's evident desire to reinforce a dual 'myth' of the Indian, of whom it can offer but two images: the screaming devil and the incongruous, comic, Christianized, castrated servant. The two images correspond very precisely to the two ways in which, according to Barthes (*Mythologies*, p. 151), bourgeois society deals with 'the other': it can either deny it or convert it into a harmless replica of itself.

Blueback apart, the Indians of *Drums* are never individualized, and scarcely conceived as human beings at all: they have no wives, no families (only once is an Indian woman visible in the film, in long-shot in the closing scene), and only a corporate identity as an emanation of 'natural' savagery. Their eruption (under Caldwell's direction) threatens white civilization generally, but is linked specifically to white monogamy, family, home. The first uprising provokes Lana's miscarriage; the second is signalled by the abrupt appearance of three Indians in Mrs. McClellan's bedroom, as she lies asleep on the bed she shared with Barny, as if the manifestation of her dreams. Later, on the parapet of the fort, she invokes Barny; as if in response, an Indian rises up and shoots her. The film repeatedly stresses the horror of the war, which can be taken to signify the terrible price of repression, on both the political and psychological levels.

The final sequences of the film are worth considering in detail—especially, the detail of their significant juxtapositions. Gil's search for Lana within the devastated fort is counterpointed with the soldiers' search for Caldwell: at one point,

they mistake Gil for him. The destruction of Caldwell (the Indians' potency) is necessary for the final reconstitution of the family. Gil is led to Lana eventually by the child's cries; at the moment husband and wife are reunited the cries stop. There follows the film's single most extraordinary moment: Blueback rises up in the pulpit and pulls down Caldwell's eyepatch over his own eye. The moment fuses in a single image the film's three 'problem' characters in a drastic effort of resolution, Caldwell destroyed by the safe, castrated Indian who then wordlessly usurps the parson's position, making himself into a visual sermon about the repression on which our civilisation is built.

The film can then proceed to its final affirmation: the war ended, the new flag carried in and raised to the chapel belfry, "My country 'tis of thee" on the soundtrack, Blueback saluting and Daisy (Mrs. McClellan's black servant) gazing in admiration, the two ennobled by separate low-angle close shots (as precise a cinematic equivalent for Barthes' black soldier on the cover of *Paris-Match* as one could ask for). The myth of America as true multi-racial democracy seems (in retrospect from the '80s) at once enforced and exposed, the claim to the realization of the ideals of freedom and equality now appearing almost derisory. Yet the ending remains, even today, very moving, partly because of its Fordian fervour and commitment, partly because it is magnificently sustained by the structure of the whole film, of which it is the absolutely logical culmination; partly, perhaps, because the idealism now appears so much more vulnerable than Ford could have intended. □

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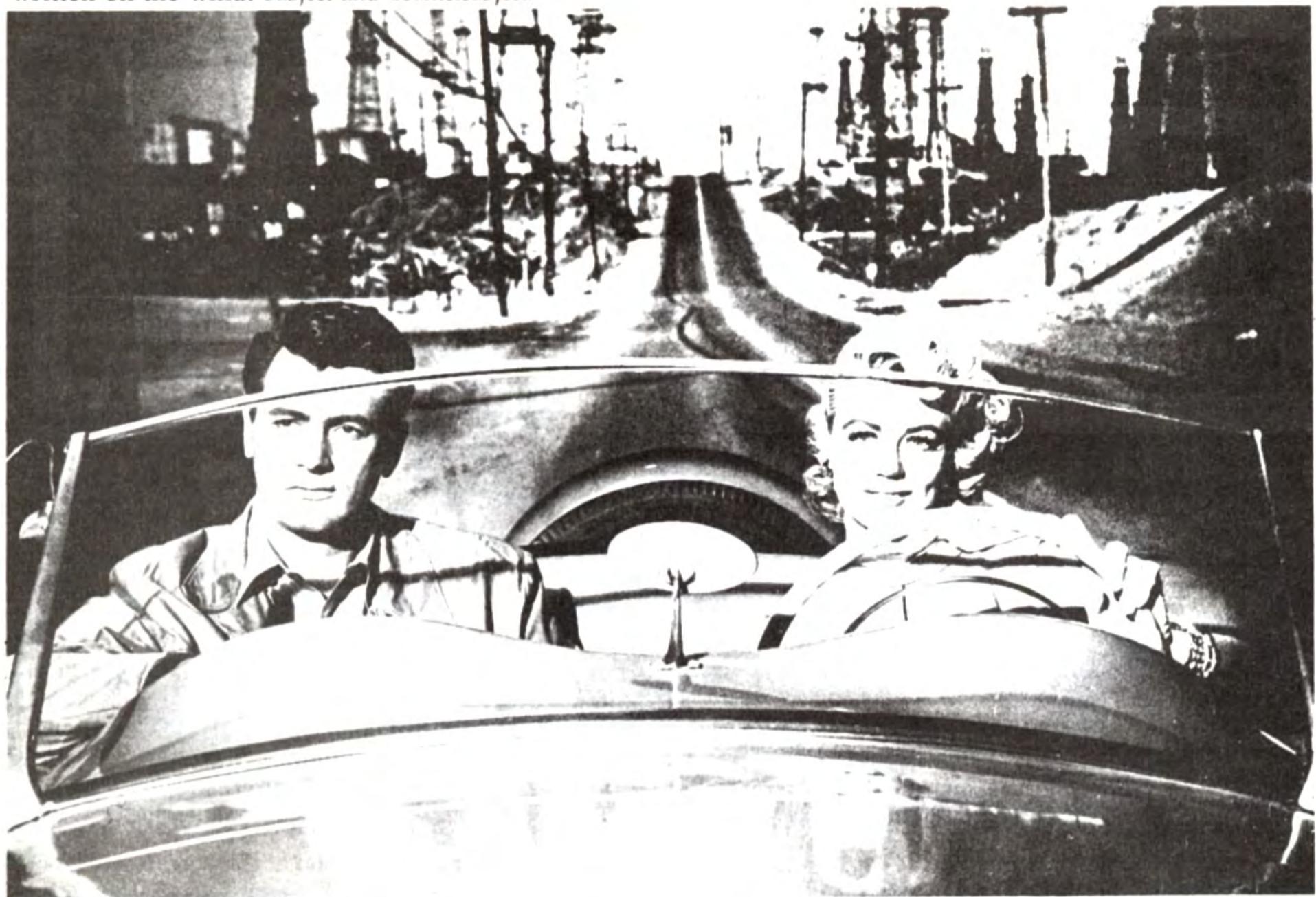
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Written on the Wind: Subject and Countersubject.



SIRK and BACH: Fugal Construction in *Written on the Wind*

by Bruce Fairley

INTRODUCTION

DURING A SEMINAR AT THE NATIONAL Film Theatre in London in the mid-'70s, Douglas Sirk threw out a casual comment to the effect that *Written on the Wind* was constructed according to the principles of a Bach fugue. Having an admiration for the fugue's bold superficial simplicity, yet deceptive formal complexity, gained through its interpretation on large church pipe organs by an organist friend of mine, and intrigued by the possibility of actually exploring uncharted territory in the analysis of the film, I decided to explore Sirk's claim systematically in order to determine the extent to which *Written on the Wind*'s fugal form is evident and how it affects the film's overall signification.

The likeliness that Sirk would attempt to produce a film on such a premise is real. First, he had a well-established background in a wide range of artistic disciplines. As he says in his interview with Jon Halliday (*Sirk on Sirk*, BFI, 1972):

I first studied law, but later on I gradually turned to philosophy

and the history of art. And all the time I did some painting . . . and also some things to do with the theatre.

Music has also played a large role in some of his films, including *Schlussakkord*, his first melodrama, which contains large portions of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and *Hofkonzert*. Secondly, Sirk was always mindful of the meaning of "melodrama" as drama with music—music that was both real and metaphorical.

FORMAL SIMILARITIES

FOR THE PURPOSE OF THIS ANALYSIS, I TAKE the beginning of the film proper (and the fugue) to be the beginning of the flashback, in the advertising agency office. The role and formal placement of the opening sequence, titles, credits and musical theme will be discussed later. Also, I have not distinguished, if indeed such a distinction can be made, between fugues in general and Bach fugues. It is hard to say whether the 48 fugues of *The Well Tempered Clavier* strictly followed the existing rules of fugal form, or whether the inventiveness that Bach used to create so many unique compositions was instrumental in develop-

ing the form beyond the rules of that time. The truth is probably somewhere in between and the distinction not essential to the discussion of Sirk's adoption of the form.

The basic forms of the fugue are thought to have originated in vocal music of the 15th century and developed into a unique, independent form of music during the 17th century. A great deal of study in the form of the fugue was done at the turn of the century (E. Prout, 1892; A. Gedalge, 1901; C.H. Kitson, 1909). In its basic form a fugue is a composition in two or more parts or "voices," with three and four voices being most common. Usually, but not always, there is a single theme. Each of the voices makes use of that theme. It is essential, as well, that the voices each play an equal role, that is, none dominates another. To this extent *Written on the Wind* utilizes the form of a fugue if one considers each of the four main characters as a voice and the narrative as the theme. The four voices, in order of appearance, are Lucy Moore/Lauren Bacall, Mitch Wayne/Rock Hudson, Kyle Hadley/Robert Stack, and Marylee Hadley/Dorothy Malone. The equality of the voices was deliberately planned by Sirk. He explained to Halliday how he did this. Hudson and Bacall

... were, box-office-wise, the real stars of the picture. And I think this was then, as before, a happy combination—to put your star values not in the so-called interesting parts, but to strengthen the other side by good names and first-rate acting. For an actor an eccentric role like the Stack or Malone parts certainly always is more rewarding to play than the straight one. Now, this picture offered a quartet of equally competent performances and, as you know, Malone and Stack got Academy nominations.

The form of the narrative also helped each voice remain equal. If we consider each time any of the four principal characters enters or exits from a scene be to the beginning of a segment then Mitch appears in 56 segments, Lucy in 42 segments, Kyle in 42 segments, and Marylee in 27 segments: with three of the four characters there is a remarkably equal screen presence. Only Marylee is seen less often, but she is the last character to be introduced. This delay is offset by at least two references to her before she appears, and by the strength of the character once it has been introduced. In addition, none of the characters appears by his or herself, or with any other combination of characters, for any great length of time. Virtually every combination of two, three or four of the main characters is represented in at least one segment of the film. The exception is that there is no segment where everyone but Mitch is present. The evenness of representation is assisted by the virtual absence of segments containing no primary characters, the exceptions being brief shots in the servants' quarters just before the shooting, and a short shot of Jasper Hadley in his study, on the telephone.

In a fugue, the first voice to enter is called the *subject*, which is repeated frequently throughout the composition. It is appropriate that a woman (Lucy Moore) is the "subject" of the film since melodramas have historically been considered "women's films." Lucy is also the only female character in the film who could be considered an ordinary person of the same social status as the audience. In fact the music that accompanies her introduction is a Mantovani-type, middle-of-the-road orchestral piece that could have come from any of the popular '50s Hollywood melodramas. This social status is also a common feature of the Hollywood melodrama. As the subject of the fugue, Lucy is being introduced to us as the central figure of the narrative, even though her central position (Kyle and Mitch are both in love with her) is not subsequently stressed.

The introduction of the second voice which, in fugue, is termed "the second entry of the subject" presents us with a repetition of the subject, only slightly modified in tonal quality from the first entry so that it may be distinguishable. Mitch Wayne, as the second entry, is, indeed, similar to Lucy. They are both level-headed, ordinary people, which is to say that they both fit into the dominant ideology of the established society. They both wear, in the first scene, conservative grey business suits, they are both pawns in Kyle Hadley's game, and they are the stars of the film. The characters even tell us they are similar to each other when, in the taxi, Mitch says, "You know something? Maybe we're two of a kind." Significantly, the fugal form has, here, at the same time, distinguished between the two sexes, and minimized that distinction by stressing their similarities. Interestingly, the second entry of the subject is called the *answer*. To Lucy, at least, Mitch becomes the answer to her search for a suitable marriage partner, Marylee considers Mitch to be the answer to her life and, to Kyle, Mitch has always been the answer to his need for a link with the society in which he lives. The equality of the voices is also maintained by Mitch's important, though less central role in the film, in that all the other main characters (including Kyle) appear to be in love with him.

In a fugue the subject and the answer continue to repeat throughout the composition with a counterpoint that provides tension (the respect that Mitch has for Lucy's marriage to Kyle) and a measure of suspense until the "happy" ending (the longing that the audience has for them to be reunited). The theme song "Written on the Wind" is the musical representation of the counterpoint. It is repeated several times in the film, each time Mitch and Lucy have a significant meeting. It is the musical sound of the separation and of the hope of being reunited.

The third entry of the subject is in a different octave from the first. Kyle has a higher social status, a higher financial position and is emotionally quite "high strung." Here, once again, the difference in sex is not significant. Like Lucy, Kyle is also a central figure; central to the action in the narrative. It is Kyle who causes Lucy and Mitch to meet, separate, and come together again. In a fugue the counterpoint of the subject and the answer can be called the *countersubject*. Kyle serves also as the countersubject by causing the separation of Mitch and Lucy. Often the third entry of the subject is momentarily delayed by the use of a *codetta*. This serves to remind us that what is to follow is not only a repeat of the subject but the introduction of a new voice. In the film this takes the form of the first few shots at the 21 Club, before the entrance of Lucy and Mitch. The codetta is an establishing segment of the yet-to-be-introduced Kyle Hadley.

The fourth entry of the subject is Marylee Hadley and occurs later in the film. This entry may have one of several relationships with the first three entries. In *Written on the Wind* it serves, with the third entry, as a *second countersubject*. In this respect it is similar to the third. Like Kyle, Marylee also occupies a "higher position." In the film, this entry of the voice is represented by the gramophone record in the introduction scene. The music is "foreign" (Latin-American), sexually unrestrained in temperament and, after several significant recurrences, finally becomes the music for the "death dance" which draws Jasper Hadley up the stairs to his demise.

After the introduction of all the voices, the *exposition* of the fugue's theme has been completed. Indeed, if the film were to end here we would have a pretty good idea of the form, tone and the purpose of the entire film.



Written on the Wind: Visual counterpoint.

What follows the completion of the exposition are further entries of the four versions of the subject which together carry forth the theme of the film. Interspersed throughout the remainder of the film and the fugue are *episodes* which are based on the tension created between the counterpoint of the subject and answer, and the countersubjects. The episodes are optional devices used to develop the theme. In keeping with the equality of the four characters, each is involved in at least two episodes:

- Lucy has two private talks with her father-in-law, Jasper Hadley. The first occurs on her return to the town of Hadley with Kyle, after their extended honeymoon. In this episode Lucy announces that Kyle has stopped drinking too much and that she knows all about his fears and feelings of inadequacy. The second episode occurs in the entrance hall of the Hadley home when Lucy describes Kyle's return to excessive drinking and her admission that she did not know what was wrong with him. The first episode joins the first and third voices and the second episode splits them apart again.
- Mitch Wayne's episodes are with his "salt of the earth" father on the Wayne farm. Both episodes discuss the problems of the Kyle/Mitch/Lucy love triangle. The first episode announces the existence of the triangle and the second announces the proposed demise of the triangle by Mitch's leaving the country. The parallels between Lucy's and Mitch's episodes with their "fathers" reinforce and add to the similarities in the two characters, the subject and the answer.
- Kyle's episodes are with the doctor. Both of them (in the entrance hall of the Hadley home and at the drug store) are depressing occasions in which Kyle is left feeling more helpless and farther away from having an "ideal" relationship. This is later summarized by Kyle himself when he says he doesn't even love himself.
- Marylee's two episodes parallel Kyle's. They are her two aborted love affairs; one at the bar and the other at the motel with the gas station attendant. Marylee is also, through these episodes, shown to be unable to develop her "ideal" relationship. Marylee's self-hatred is also summarized when she says that she is "dirty, period."

One additional episode which does not fall into the above pattern is Mitch's conversation with Jasper about marrying Marylee. It is a significant episode in that it connects, and formalizes the tension between the two "sides" of the fugal theme (Mitch and Lucy vs. Kyle and Marylee as one side, and Kyle and Lucy vs. Mitch and Marylee as the other side).

The total effect of all of this is a complexity of closing and widening gaps between the characters throughout the film. Mitch and Lucy are together at first, then apart for most of the film, then reunited at the end. Kyle and Lucy are almost the opposite: apart, together, apart. Kyle and Marylee's relationship parallels Mitch and Lucy's: "together," apart, "together."

The result of this complexity is the dominance of the theme over the details of any single character or combination of characters.

Earlier I mentioned that I had excluded the scenes, titles, and credits before the beginning of the flashback from being part of the form of a fugue. This is only partly true. The fugue, especially with Bach, was introduced by a *prelude*. The purpose of the prelude was to set the stage for the fugue that was to follow and, much like the overture of other forms of music but with more subtlety, prepare us for what was to follow. The prelude in *Written on the Wind* does this very well. It, in many respects, disposes of the narrative so that we may concentrate on the development of the theme of the film. As Sirk states:

In *Written on the Wind* . . . you start with an end situation. The spectator is supposed to know what is waiting for him. It is a different type of suspense, or anti-suspense. The audience is forced to turn its attention to the *how* instead of the *what*—to structure instead of plot, to variations of a theme, to deviations from it, instead of the theme itself. This is what I call the Euripidean manner. And at the end there is no solution of the antithesis, just the *deus ex machina*, which today is called the "happy end."

(Halliday, 1972, p. 119)

Written on the Wind's melodramatic narrative has, at the same time, a tragic theme. Sirk, himself, feels that the theme of the film is failure. Of *Written on the Wind* and *The Tarnished Angels* he said:

Both pictures are studies of failure; of people who can't make a success of their lives.

(Halliday, pg. 119)

It may be that this tension between the "melodramatic" and the "tragic" is the result of the fugal construction: the bold superficial simplicity necessary for the melodrama and the deceptive formal complexity that is often the mark of a tragedy. The cyclical, repetitive, and somewhat endless nature of the fugue enhances the *échec* that Sirk was trying to portray—having failed and at the same time being blocked from succeeding. This is the tragic situation. However, the highly dramatic and simplified (we are told the ending in the "prelude") melodramatic presentation minimizes our recognition of this fact.

The effect of this complex form on the overall meaning and sense of the film is, to be sure, also complex. There is a clear statement that the equality of the sexes and equality of different social classes (the Hadleys vs. the other principal characters), represented by the four equal voices of the fugue, does not work within the dominant ideology of capitalist society and the patriarchal family in the film's diegesis. If, within this ideology, the female characters had been submissive, manipulable, and the less wealthy characters had had less of an influence on the lives of the wealthy, then there would have been less tension and less drama. The fugal form would not allow this to happen.

Unfortunately, the flexibility of the fugal form itself does not allow generalized observations to be drawn (with as much confidence) from the more detailed aspects of the film. A study of the complex interactions of the characters within individual segments did not reveal, to me, any formal relation to the musical form described earlier (unless more can be said of the use of the episodes).

Finally, one puzzling contradiction was revealed. I heartily agree with Robin Wood who commented that the film has a strong "unifying sense of frustration and desperation, unfulfilment, and the impossibility of satisfying desire within the available social/familial structure." In contrast, however, the overall sense of the form of the fugue as used by Bach is noticeably uplifting, satisfying, and fulfilling even if experienced outside the religious context within which the fugues were composed. Perhaps, on the other hand, there is no contradiction. It may serve to demonstrate that the non-capitalist, non-patriarchal elements of our society are not totally suppressed and continue to develop. However one reads this, it is interesting to observe that a centuries-old musical form, once used by Bach to express and promote an uplifting attitude toward the patriarchal and family-based institution of the Christian faith (central also to the American ideal) has been successfully adapted by Sirk to demonstrate that ideology's contradictions and to suggest the tensions and frustrations that ideal produces. □

An Interview with Lizzie Borden

by Maureen Judge and Lori Spring

We interviewed Lizzie Borden last September when she was in Toronto at the Festival of Festivals for the screenings of her latest feature, Working Girls.

Was Born In Flames your first film?

I made one film before *Born In Flames* which I did everything on. It was a very fictional documentary about women's groups but it was strange and I don't like to show it. I made every mistake in the book which is what I wanted to do. *Born In Flames* took about five years to make because at that point when I had really no track record, it was impossible to get funding for that subject matter, and I also didn't have a script because I didn't write one. For me the important thing about *Born In Flames* was to use it almost as a political discovery process. When I came to New York I was completely overwhelmed by the political situation. I was really quite taken by the fact that the feminist movement was so divided into different groups, that the black women didn't deal with the white women or with the Hispanic women and there were all these parallel cultures. So the purpose of doing *Born In Flames* was to create a microcosm in which black and white women, women who were political without knowing it, sort of white, punky anarchist-type women and then the more conscious feminist women would all come together and work. Making the film ended up being the process by which I would learn about all of that and also the way in which hopefully the point could be made that this is possible.

Could you talk a bit about how and why *Born In Flames* took the form it did?

A lot about *Born In Flames* grew out of my knowing I had no money, and I couldn't get any. I had taught myself film editing and was working as an editor. This was a great way to do the film, the most logical, easiest, because it's private, you're in a room by yourself. You don't have to deal with production which is just insanity. You can pace yourself. I had a loft and I always managed to work out of my house which was even better and I had a steenbeck which I could work on on my own time. I could shoot once a month and could come back with my footage and work and work and not have to rent a machine. That's how that film evolved. *Born In Flames* ended up taking so long—I tried to make that be a virtue in some way, to try to find a method where I wouldn't need continuity, I wouldn't need anything that you need in normal films because I knew I couldn't get it



Lizzie Borden

How did you go from the raw material of your research to your script concept?

I had done a lot of taping and a lot of interviews with people. I decided to make the film take place all in one day for a variety of reasons: one, I had very little money and I knew I couldn't run all over the city shooting in different locations and the other thing was I wanted to focus on the concept of work and the best way to do that was to focus on just one work day. I also wanted to avoid psychological investigations of who Molly was, why she was working, who was she before, how did she get involved, because they didn't particularly work for me. In fact, I had shot some flashbacks which were about who brought her to work, and what her first reactions were. I just felt that all you need to know is that she's there. I preferred to leave it open. After I did that I realized I had to somehow decide who the working women would be and who the clients would be . . . I had that worked out in a very sketchy, very schematic way, and I started to build on that.

I noticed a lot of the clients were bald or balding. [laughter]

A lot of men are balding these days. [more laughter] True. A lot of them are. A lot of the ones with hair ended up on the cutting room floor. In fact, there were ones I wanted to have in. There was Frank, an off-duty cop, but I had to cut the film down to a manageable length.

and I couldn't get any kind of consistency in the actors or the crew. It would have been crazy to try to have an aesthetic of beauty or a kind of aesthetic of perfection. My idea on that was, be as sloppy, crazy and as wild as possible and then just find a way to create an editing style in which anything could be cut next to anything and the pace of it would somehow manage to create a kind of unified film world.

How did the idea for Working Girls develop after Born in Flames?

There was a theme in *Born In Flames* that ended up on the cutting room floor. I wanted this kind of narrative subtext, a little parallel theme of a hooker who ends up supporting this underground revolution. I was always interested in the subject of prostitution on a theoretical level. In New York there are a lot of prostitute organizations. Coyote doesn't exist in New York but there's a group called Black Women For Wages For Housework who are tied to a black prostitutes' organization in Brooklyn. There's another group called PONY, Prostitutes of New York. So I met these women and was really fascinated. Then I found out that a couple of women I knew were actually working—they were like us; I mean they weren't, like, you know, real militant prostitute women. I realized that I still had a lot of prejudices and stereotypes about working so I asked this one friend of mine who admitted she worked, "Can I come and see what the place is like?"

I'm curious about the dialogue. I noticed that it's your story but the credit for the screenplay was yourself with Sandra Kay. How did you two work and what was her role?

I wrote the story and then I wrote two or three drafts of the screenplay. Sandra Kay was somebody who was very acquainted with that world since she had done a lot of her own research. I asked her to read the script and she made some changes which made it much more authentic and general to the business. I really wanted to give her credit for that. She was a great help with that. I suppose I could have done the writing without Sandra and I could have edited it without the help of Susan Martin, who was just fantastic, but the film wouldn't have been as good. They contributed a lot. I finish a film and there are 30 things I'd change, in the casting and in the writing—some of the writing seems so didactic—even the ending is kind of weird for me but when you're in a framework you try to think of what's logical within that context, you have reasons for things.

The film has this kind of documentary feel to it. Your choice of actors who seem to be kind of non- or semi-professionals feeds into that "almost-documentary" tone.

A lot of the people in the film are actors from theatre. In fact, I was very lucky to get Louise Smith to play the title role. She was quite amazing in terms of being able to feel very free about taking her clothes off and dealing with all these guys because after a week and a half she really did feel like a hooker. Especially after the week where we did all the bedroom scenes at once. I wanted to do the bedroom scenes in a very stylized way. I think it's interesting that people have a documentary sense because the film is very stylized, especially the bedroom scenes which are very controlled. I just felt that I had to satisfy curiosity. What I had to do was provide data, almost, for people who were unaware of how prostitution worked. One of the things that happened when I first showed this was people were saying, "Well, okay that's fine but it's not really like that" and I'd say, "Hey, wait a minute, but it is like that." It was really trying to

present something the way it is.

I found Lucy sometimes a little too much like a caricature.

Yes, but when you meet any madam, they're cartoons because they're not ordinary people anymore. Imagine, like pimps are cartoons? They've had to justify what they're doing so much that there's very little of them left as people. They live, work and breathe this job in this phony set which is their work place. I built the set in my loft, which was modelled on several real places. These places are airless, claustrophobic, there are no windows—imagine how strange and distorted these women really are. For me, that's the real story. They have no lives on the outside really because they've had to justify and make excuses for the business that they're in and to not think that they're exploiting women. That's why at the beginning when they say that Lucy could pass a lie detector test saying that she runs a dating service—part of that kind of character would think that it's a dating service. There's a level on which the madams are like expert traffic controllers and once they become desensitized to what they're doing they become really caricatured. It's funny—when we formed a limited partnership and we were trying to get investors, this madam came. She didn't tell us she was a madam but we knew she'd come to potentially invest in the film. Her response was a riot. She totally identified with the madam, she said, "Well, whoever that woman is she should fire Dawn. That girl is making a mess of the place." [laughter] She saw it as a totally realistic portrait. That was the legitimization I felt I needed.

When I think of prostitution, Godard's Vivre Sa Vie comes to mind, which I think provides a real context for its main character, Nana. You see her fall into prostitution, not through any reason of her own—she doesn't consciously choose it and in fact she dies in the end. Godard is constantly undercutting any moral judgment we would make. In Working Girls we pick up the narrative with Molly already a prostitute, and then Molly leaves the house.

I decided I had to make a film about the rituals and the frameworks in which working does happen and the attitudes about it. I, too, had my myths about why women worked and what it's like for the women who do and I really came to the conclusion that it is economic. It is work and in this culture there's ample reason for women to want to do it, for purely economic reasons. The hookers in most films have to be punished because, you know, what they're doing is so "wrong." There's that element of a moral judgment which either is translated into some form of danger coming from the outside or a psychological problem. A lot of the statistics on street prostitution have somehow been made to seem the status quo for everyone. There is always the sense that either they're terrible, degraded women or they're pushed into it, in which case they're not responsible. But I found that a lot of women have consciously chosen it for very, very clear reasons and a lot of them just do it for a short period of time.

Throughout the film we see Molly, along with the other women, constantly making her own choices, so I'm curious as to why she leaves. If she's already in control of her life, then why is it such a liberating force for her to leave?

There was an implication, I don't know whether it's clear, that she left the house because the house was a bitch, but

OPPOSITE: Above—*Born in Flames*: the voice and gaze of black feminist militancy. Below—A white anarchist punk joins the cause.



she's gonna call the guy who gave her his business card.

I find a conflict in that imagery. There's the very pointed image of the card going into the wallet, but there's also the imagery of the closing sequence where she throws her dress onto the ground. At the beginning of the film she takes the dress out of the filing cabinet, which is, I think, very clever, because the filing cabinet is a work space, so by her throwing away the dress it gives the implication that that's the end of her work as a prostitute.

No, you see, I wanted it to be a real sense of questioning. Well, what is she going to do? I don't want there to be any definite conclusion at all. My sense is that she's burned out after a double day. Lucy is getting on her nerves. It's not a moral judgement because it's not the guys so much—I mean she has a *horrible* time with Paul but ultimately her argument is with Lucy. The whole film is really about an employer-employee relationship, so by her putting the card away I wanted the viewer to think, well, this may be a possible move. I wanted there to be an implication that she *might*, in fact, call this guy.

[*Since the interview Lizzie Borden has informed us that she has re-edited the ending and cut out the shot of Molly throwing her dress away . . . in order to make it more ambiguous, since Molly throwing away the dress has been seen as moralizing and interpreted as her giving the 'work' up completely.*]

Are you suggesting that the outside world is any different from the apartment world?

Well, if she saw one guy who says, "I can give you as much money as you're making here to just see me," it's like being a sugar daddy, *sure* it would be different. She would be making *all* of her money without having to deal with Lucy. I wanted it to be clear that she wasn't going to go back to that house because the house had a lot of problems. Molly and Lucy represent two different kinds of attitudes towards prostitution. Lucy is almost the Helen Gurley Brown of the prostitute world, where you have to please men, you have to do things for men, you have to formulate this entire code of behaviour that will make men happy. Molly, who is seeing a woman on the outside and who has no need of men on the outside, is still very pleasant to the men when she's doing her work. But she's not going to buy into the kind of aesthetic that April and Lucy are talking about, which is getting the presents and doing all this other kind of stuff. So her conflict keeps growing with Lucy because Lucy is not direct about anything and Molly is direct. Lucy is the ultimate manipulator so Molly, by leaving that place, is saying, "Lucy, I will not buy into this whole view about it." It's not the kind of relationship to the work that Molly would want to have.

Why isn't she able to articulate an answer to give to April about why she, an intelligent girl with two degrees from Yale, can't find anything else to do?

'Cause it's sort of true. I mean that's the point, that in this culture the kinds of work that are available to educated women are still shockingly, horribly, inadequately paid. For most women who came out of school, I mean we all know this, it's very difficult to find any kind of work that pays enough to be worth it or that is even close to one's area of experience or potential expertise. For April to say, "What are you doing here?" is basically taking it down to that same economic thing, "Hey look, you know, you're here for economic reasons too, why be so stupid?" Of course April is very cynical and won't believe there's a way out, whereas

Molly, I would hope to think well one day she'll have a photo exhibit and maybe will be able to make enough money from her work.

But I still find the final image a conflict. If she's going to that man it seems nothing more than a promotion, so to speak, because she's still in control of her life. There are very few moments when those girls are not in control of their lives within the apartment. I'm not sure what you're trying to say in terms of either prostitution or the fact that she leaves because she's had too much. Is she not going to find the same thing elsewhere?

Perhaps she will.

So does any change really happen to her? Does she grow?

Well, I don't know.

I guess after Born In Flames, in which there's a real radical transformation of the different women in the film, and liberation is seen as possible through violence, you know, it's very active . . .

Yes, but it's a fantasy . . .

But it's very much there, for whatever reasons you made Born In Flames as science fiction, it's still a very radical and activist film, rallying different women together. I remember when I saw it I thought, "Wow, this is great, lots of women aren't talking to one another and that's what this film is dealing with." Working Girls doesn't really deal with that.

Born In Flames was really taking a lot of liberties, but that was all about hope. There's something so ultimately pragmatic about *Working Girls*. That's the difference. Basically, the whole point of doing any film is to try to deal with possibilities or realities, one or the other. *Born In Flames* was so much about, say, "Let's pretend we can blow the World Trade Centre up with a bomb the size of this coffee cup, let's pretend women are coming together, let's pretend all of that stuff, great, let's try to create images in which that can happen." My feeling about *this* film is that prostitution exists, we're not going to be able to get rid of it in the next hundred years, two hundred years, two thousand years unless something *vast* happens and it probably won't. People have come up to me and said, "Oh God, you're a feminist, how can you make a film about prostitution? It's an apology for it and that's feeding into this whole male thing."

I don't think that, but these women don't organize together so I was just curious . . .

The point is different. In *Working Girls* I wanted to present that sense that women who work *are* conscious of the choice and it's a much more personal kind of thing that, within this world of limited options, to be able to make a choice and say, "Hey, I've made this choice and I'm not going to let this culture decide what kind of person I am." That's the whole point, that people hopefully would walk out of the film and say, "Wait a second, there *are* women who do it who don't have to feel like victims," that these women aren't victims, period. What seems really important to me is to create a film about women who decided to do it for various reasons, saying that as long as prostitution exists, we'll control the images about it.

OPPOSITE: Above—A working girl goes to work. Below: Hard at work.



Do you feel, then, that the empowering aspect of the film lies in controlling the way in which one's own image is projected?

Well, empowering, maybe yes, somewhat. You can see images of prostitutes not dressed in stiletto heels—some of them do and some of them don't, some of them went to college and some of them didn't, some of them have chosen to do it, some of them are gay and some of them aren't, so that if someone thinks "prostitute" they don't get that automatic image in their head which is full of ideas of degradation or anything like that.

So what kind of impact do you want the film to have?

One of the things that I find interesting is that some people who have seen this relate it to their own employment situation, like at the end of a hard day and it doesn't matter what it is. Even men have come up and remarked on this. This guy who was a critic from the *LA Times* had that comment. That's how I wanted the film to be read. It may not be the most obvious reading of it but I wanted that implication.

I recognized that . . . oh, yes, another slow day and we've all felt that—the film is punctuated throughout with images of Molly figuring out her tips and recording them in her book. But prostitution is such a controversial subject, it's so much in discussion now that, watching the film, one also has to deal with those issues.

What the problem is, is that instead of just seeing the film as what it is, you're feeding it into this whole other thing which is all about *activism* about prostitution . . . What I'm finding is that the people who have the most problems with this film are the people who really like *Born In Flames* because they come to it, as you seemed to have, with a different expectation.

Well, I think that's very unfair of people on the one hand, but on the other hand, they're two films that you've done and I'm trying to reconcile them.

I don't think they're all that separated. One is the microcosm and the other is the macrocosm. *Born In Flames* didn't really deal with who any of these people were or where they came from. All they were were people who would talk from points of position and make statements. What would happen with any of these people, how were they supporting themselves—certainly there wasn't any great revolutionary underground with coffers for these women to be drawing from. There's no sense in which *Born In Flames* ever dealt with economic structures on a practical level at all. At the end of *Born In Flames* after the World Trade Centre is blown up, what happens to those women? They all get thrown in jail, of course, but I didn't want to show that, it's too depressing.

I felt there would always be more women coming.

But that level of consciousness hadn't entered the culture enough. Now we have Yuppies and so forget it. [laughter] What I'm doing in *Working Girls* is trying to neutralize the image of prostitution. You're trying to take the film into something about "Let's do something, let's organize these women, let's get out there, let's make statements." My feeling, once I saw the people who worked in this situation, is that it's very neutralized. They go to work and there are bad things about it, but the bad things about it are just a little different from the bad things about other kinds of jobs.

The film seems to want to diffuse those issues around prostitution so that it can be seen more barely in terms of its economic dynamics and how that controls people's lives.

Absolutely. A lot of people come to the idea of prostitution with a lot of preconceptions. First of all, they think it's dangerous, second of all, they usually think that women have pimps pushing them into prostitution or this whole thing of psychological problems but also they think that there's a lot of dangers on many levels—police busts or health dangers—any of those kinds of things. Also, practically every prostitute movie, even *Vivre Sa Vie*, usually ends up with someone dying because they can't get out or because they're stalked by a client who's weird or bizarre, or someone getting deeply ill from it—usually that's not in movies because men don't like to think about it, but they do like the idea of hookers getting hurt.

There's a great deal of emphasis in the film on the care that Molly takes not to become ill.

That's the point, this is like a factory and the precautions are even more than in an ordinary factory. I didn't want to do a documentary because I wanted also to demystify what happens in the bedroom. People think, "Oh God, prostitutes must be so worn out, I mean, all that sex!" "All that sex" is a myth. The sex is five minutes out of a half hour session, the rest is bullshit, is talking, is going up and down stairs, writing into the book and then talking to the guy for 10 minutes and then having sex for about a minute and a half and then going to wash up, then coming back. It's all about language. A lot of women keep getting return business because they make these customers think of them as some kind of a surrogate girlfriend.

The power relationships in the film are interesting, particularly in the scene with the young man, Paul, who wants Molly to become his girlfriend on the outside. She basically has the choice of saying yes or no, but when she tries to assert this control, he usurps it by bringing things back to the level of their present hooker/client relationship, saying "Yes, but I'm paying you so right now you're my whore."

In terms of preconceptions about prostitution where we think men have to be in power because they have the money, they're buying these women and therefore it's all in their hands but then after doing a lot of research I realized, no, that's not exactly true—the women have the commodity to sell. Therefore they can make a lot of decisions about who they sell it to, how they sell it, what's their attitude when they do it. Basically, they're selling a unit of time for a certain amount of money and it happens to involve a certain aspect of their body to a greater or lesser degree. That was very well established. Molly is very much in control of all of the sessions, as all the girls are. Then what happens towards the end of the day—Molly goes into double shift—she's tired, she wants to go home, Lucy is squeezing more out of her—eventually Molly is like a middle-class girl who tries to be accommodating, but she starts to lose control. First of all there's that horrible Asian guy. That goes out of control because there's no language, he refuses to talk, he refuses to deal with her on any kind of level on which she's able to deal with the johns. That's bad, it's nasty, it's messy, yuck. By the way, how did it look with the tape, did it just go black? [Tape was put on to excise the shot, in lieu of actually cutting it as per request of the Ontario Film Review Board for Toronto Festival of Festivals screening.]

No. It was paper tape. You could see through it.

You could?

That was great. [Laughter] I thought that was very subversive.

That's true. Anyway, the encounter with the Asian guy was nasty but it was still something she could deal with. But then Paul comes in and there's this intimation that part of her is a little attracted to him, there's something about him that has drawn her and that's her fatal mistake, to be drawn to this person who has just spent probably weeks manipulating her into this position of liking him a little bit. At the point where he then turns the tables on her she's vulnerable for the first time—that's the highest dramatic point in the movie, but it's very subtle.

It's really the only sensual scene in the film except for the opening of the film.

Yeah, and it messes up. She realizes that she's let herself get taken, and she feels devastated.

She seems to be quite distressed when he calls her a whore.

It's just that she's realized she's gone beyond whatever it is.

exhaustion, she's giving more than she's been able to get. Money at that point isn't worth any amount of anything and she's become emotionally confused. That's the point where it sort of spirals downward which is the reason she feels she has to get out of that house. It's not because she's rejecting prostitution but that she's lost control, and losing that control means that there's something wrong.

But she still had enough control to leave.

No, but that's different.

But in a sense she does rise above it.

In a way, but never really, because there isn't a way to change the language enough to completely erase that on some level she *is* a whore. The entire theme throughout the day is what do you call this—and that discussion where Dawn jumps up and says, "You're a whore, you're a whore"—a whore, no, that word is too loaded. I mean people call anybody who's sold out a whore or a prostitute.



A working girl prepares for work.

Think of the uses of those words in our culture. They're no longer descriptive, they've become so symbolically loaded for what these women are actually doing.

Having encountered censorship in Toronto, and also in the States, and having had to cut the handjob sequence, how do you anticipate this is going to affect what you do in your future films?

In Toronto they always want to cut my dick shots.

Like *Born In Flames* when it played here?

Yeah, it's the same shot only longer. In the States I wouldn't have to cut the shot—there's no reason I *have* to cut the shot other than that no major distributor is going to take it with that in. My choice is then do I not cut this film and limit its audience, or do I cut it and let a lot of people see it. In Ontario, it's very different. Here the idea that you *have* to cut it in order to show it at all is a totally different kind of censorship. I don't think the film suffers tremendously if that shot isn't in but I actually resent having to cut it outright and that's why I didn't do it. I covered it with tape. For me it's a question of emotional effect. For the States, I'm going to substitute a shot where Molly's wiping come off her hands because in the States I also have to cut the come on the stomach shot for some reason. Those two things would get an X rating—I don't know why. I wanted to make it dirty, I wanted something very dirty right there, because the viewer needs to be reminded at that point what she's actually doing for the money. I think I'll always keep trying to do this, then if it has to be cut it has to be cut. I happen to think that in the Bellocchio film [Devil In The Flesh, *also screened at the Toronto Festival of Festivals*], that the blow job scene is the best thing in the film. I think what we need is a redefinition of pornography. *Working Girls* is not pornographic, nor is the Bellocchio film. The Bellocchio film is gorgeous because it's about a woman's desire, it's absolutely beautiful. And my film, I really made it quite literally and very much about "this is the work." It's totally not about exciting men for reasons that would then be used against women, in fact it's the reverse. I would imagine the Censor Board had more problems with *Working Girls* than they would with the Bellocchio film because the Bellocchio

film actually reinforces men as being these very attractive desirable people—which, you know, I think some of them are. *Working Girls* is going to have a bigger distribution than *Born In Flames*. *Born In Flames* had very marginal distribution, whereas with *Working Girls* I've had flirtations from major companies, they don't know quite what to do with it, but like "My god, is this an exploitation film or is this film a great crossover film or is this film going to be X-rated in spite of the cut or who's going to see this?"—this little lure of commercialism starts being dangled. So not just the censorship issue but this issue of accessibility is something which gets dangled. You see these incredible successes like Doris Dorie's film or Spike Lee's film, and you realize, well, Dorie's film is still about men, it's not about women. If you do anything about women that doesn't necessarily have men as the central characters then it's not as commercial. So you begin to question your viability as a filmmaker—how to fund these films, who's going to give you money. I made *Born In Flames* on a shoe string. *Working Girls* was shot for a hundred thousand dollars but the final budget, including everything, the blow-up (we shot on super sixteen for the purpose of blowing up), ended up being three hundred thousand. Ultimately you need private money, so is that a kind of censorship on yourself? I always wanted to do a porno film for women and eventually I will, but I'll probably fund that myself and I'll show *everything*, once I figure out what it is I want to show. The point is, I'll shoot it for fifty thousand dollars, I'll find a way to finance it myself and I'll probably make a fortune, ironically enough. You just have to work up or down according to what your idea is and some are infinitely more commercial. If it's more commercial you don't show certain things. One of the next films I want to do has to do with people over 50 or over 60 having a hot sexual relationship, a hot romance, just because you don't see that in films. In something like that I wouldn't get explicit necessarily. My sense is that I would try to do whatever I felt I had to do and then you just see how far you can get. In Europe this isn't a problem, in America and Canada, oh please, forget it, it's the worst.

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INVADERS FROM MARS

and the Science Fiction Film in the Age of Reagan

by Barry K. Grant

TOBE HOOPER'S RECENT remake of *Invaders from Mars* seems to me an important film, although less for any intrinsic merits it might possess than for what it suggests about the contemporary mainstream American cinema in general and the science fiction film in particular. Certainly Hooper is a director worthy of study: *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) helped spark a "new wave" of horror films and has sustained a number of progressive readings;¹ *The Funhouse*, oddly overlooked at the time of its release, is, as Bruce Kawin was then aware, a cleverly self-reflexive work of horror;² and *Poltergeist* (1982), produced by Steven Spielberg, remains perhaps the best exploration to date of the underside to the sunny optimism and bourgeois suburbia of that director's own work. (His other films, including *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre 2* [1986], *Lifeforce* [1985], and *Salem's Lot* [1979], his made-for-TV adaptation of Stephen King's novel, are seriously flawed but still interesting works.)

However, I am less interested here in Hooper as a horror/sf auteur than in *Invaders from Mars* as a salient work representative of the genre today. In fact, the film may be read as the site where a number of recent trends in the genre intersect.

First, and most obviously, it is a remake, which places it in the company of a surprisingly large number of recent remakes of science fiction movies: most notably, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (Don Taylor, 1977, filmed originally as *The Island of Lost Souls* by Kenton in 1932), Kaufman's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978; Don Siegel, 1956), John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982; Nyby and Hawks, 1951), *1984* (1984; Michael Anderson, 1956), and David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986; Kurt Neumann, 1958). This marked tendency toward remakes in the genre is related to the generic hybridization which has also been occurring in science fiction with consistent frequency: *Battle Beyond the Stars* (Jimmy T. Murakami, 1980), for example, is modelled on *The Magnificent Seven* (itself modelled on Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai*), and *Outland*

(Peter Hyams, 1981) on *High Noon*. *Trancers* (1985) deftly combines science fiction and *film noir*, particularly in its opening sequence set in a dingy 21st century roadside cafe; and, as everyone knows by now, *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) uses sequences from both westerns (the burning of the family farm was inspired by Ford's *The Searchers*) and war films (the concluding dogfights around the Death Star). Of course, similar mixing and recycling has occurred in other genres, such as *film noir* (*Body Heat* and *Against All Odds*) and romantic comedy (the remake of Sturges' *Unfaithfully Yours*), and Robin Wood sees the trend of repetition and sequels as indicative of the reassurance on many levels central to the project of entertainment in the Reagan era.³ But this generic repetition seems particularly concentrated in science fiction, as does the frequency of sequels: *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980), *The Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand, 1983), *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Robert Wise, 1979, itself reprising the popular television series), *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (Nicholas Meyer,



Invaders from Mars: Karen Black and Hunter Carson.

1982), and *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986). Even *Godzilla* has returned to trample Tokyo yet again.

One's first impulse might be to explain this state of affairs as indicative of a general paucity of imagination and originality on the part of the contemporary American cinema, and hence its inevitable lapse into self-cannibalization. Wood's thesis also makes sense, and then too there is the fact that movie producers, today more than ever businessmen rather than cineastes, are looking for pre-tested product to minimize investment risks. Yet what makes it especially noteworthy in the context of science fiction is that, comparatively speaking, it is a young genre with a large literary tradition to draw upon, and thus it should be even less subject to these generic developments than other, older genres.

Science fiction film sputtered along fitfully for decades, until the 1950s, the period John Baxter appropriately calls "Springtime For Caliban."¹⁴ It was only then that the genre clearly developed distinct plot structures, character types, conventions and iconography. Prior to this relatively few science fiction films had been made. Aside from such aes-

thetically or scientifically marginal productions as the Flash Gordon or Buck Rogers serials, there were few films of importance to the genre: Méliès "artificially arranged scenes," particularly *Le Voyage Dans la Lune* (1902), Edison's *Frankenstein* (1910), *Aelita* (Jakov Protazanov, 1924), Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) and *Die Frau im Mond* (1928), *Just Imagine* (David Butler, 1930), and William Cameron Menzies' stentorian *Things to Come* (1936). Moreover, many of these films lacked true science fiction premises or failed to offer extrapolation soundly based on contemporary scientific knowledge. By contrast, there was, even before the turn of the century, a solid tradition of science fiction literature, from Verne and Wells to John Campbell, Jr.'s guiding editorship of *Amazing Stories* in the 1940s. As well, the closely related horror genre had consistently produced important films since the medium's inception, and has been well codified generically at least since the German Expressionist period and the Universal Studio horror cycle of the '30s. The number of important directors who worked in the genre before the 1950s is impressive, and far outweighs those who ventured into

science fiction: among them, Robert Wiene (*Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari*, 1920), F.W. Murnau (*Nosferatu*, 1922), Tod Browning (*Dracula*, 1931, and *Freaks*, 1932), Rouben Mamoulian (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, 1932), Carl Th. Dreyer (*Vampyr*, 1932), and Edgar G. Ulmer (*The Black Cat*, 1934).

But science fiction suddenly burst into activity in the 1950s. George Pal's *Destination Moon* and *Rocketship X-M* (Neumann), both 1950, were followed by Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The Thing* (both 1951). The rise of the genre's popularity coincided with the entrenchment of Cold War anxieties—the fear of communism, culminating in the McCarthy hearings, and the beginning of the nuclear era; as well, it was the post-war period of advanced capitalism, of greatly expanded international markets and the rise of the large multinational corporations, of Marcuse's one-dimensional man, Reisman's *The Crowd*, and of the "man in the grey flannel suit" (this last image used almost literally as the aliens in Roger Corman's 1956 *Not of this Earth*). It is no coincidence that most of the science fiction films of this period have as a common theme the loss of

individuality or identity, and the draining of self-will. American society was threatened by pressures both internal and external—mass conformity and subversion, respectively. And so an incredible profusion of monsters appeared on the nation's movie screens, beginning with Gordon Douglas' *Them!* and Eugene Lorie's *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (both 1953). Most of these creatures were explained explicitly as radioactive mutations or as prehistoric animals slumbering underground for ages and now reawakened by atomic tests. As Susan Sontag first observed, these monsters were anxious metaphors of the dangers of the Atomic bomb.⁵

When the monsters were not busy destroying cities and nations (usually the US), they operated in the average American town, yet posed an equally insidious threat. Usually from outer space, these creatures seldom brought death, but something perhaps more horrible, a "life-in-death," a state of being in which somehow one was not his or her true self. Americans were constantly in danger of being "taken over," programmed against their will as, or replaced completely by, less-than-human beings physically complete but lacking emotion. As one of the people taken over by the pods chillingly declares in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, soon there will be "no more love, no more beauty, no more pain." It is precisely this lack of emotion that defines the "super carrot" in *The Thing*, for example. The threat of colourless conformity and the communist conspiracy (often both fears were elided in these films) is clear. This depiction is grotesquely obvious in a film like *The Red Menace*, a "documentary" financed by the Pentagon's public relations department in which zombie-like Soviet invaders are shown training to infiltrate and replace Americans in every main street soda shoppe and public school. One rather strange film, *Red Planet Mars* (Harry Horner, 1952), ends with the voice of God transmitted globally by radio, resulting in a renewal of religious faith and spurring a world-wide revolution that overthrows every communist government on Earth.

So, as a film genre science fiction has been quite closely tied to its cultural/historical contexts. After all, by its nature the genre is concerned with technology, power and society, and thus more than most other genres offers a relatively direct response to current ideological issues. The remakes and sequels so common in the contemporary science fiction film, then, suggest not so much an exhaustion of the genre as a

recasting of it in current political terms. As I shall explain presently, this hypothesis seems borne out by Hooper's version of *Invaders from Mars*.

The second trend I want to discuss that is revealed in *Invaders from Mars* is the relatively new interest shown by the genre in constructing the figure of the child as a privileged consciousness. By contrast, with the exception of a clearly defined "juvenile" sub-genre, this is not a very important motif in science fiction literature. In fact, there are rather few children to be found in major science fiction novels, nor is the narrative viewpoint often that of a child. In film, however, the child has become increasingly more central in recent years. It should be noted immediately that the cinema exploits particularly well that "sense of wonder" so frequently invoked by science fiction critics as constituting the essence of the genre's appeal:⁶ the medium affords pleasure because of its scopophilic nature, and in projecting images larger and louder than life it also invites a kind of awe. Monsters, phaser-grenade and large-scale destruction are staple motifs of science fiction literature, but not the dominant ones to the extent they have been in film. Indeed, for many people the value of (that is to say, the pleasure derived from) science fiction movies lies in the quality (believability) of the special effects. Such illusions generally elicit a response of awe at the level of technological sophistication involved in their production. More specifically, though, as Martin Rubin recently noted, a conventional special effect of '70s science fiction films "is a shot . . . of an enormous spacecraft rumbling over the camera position, so that the entire underside passes overhead, massive, ominous, bristling with special effects paraphernalia," thus placing the spectator in a position of childlike, reverential awe.⁷ Extrapolative and/or speculative ideas may be contained in science fiction films, of course, but their primary concern has been to provide what Sontag calls a "sensuous elaboration" fulfilled in the genre by "the aesthetics of destruction . . . the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc."⁸ (How very much like a child's temper tantrum such scenes may be!—see Kit Reed's hilarious story "Attack of the Giant Baby.")

It is for this reason that in their translation to the screen many films based on literary works of science fiction have become more horror than science fiction. *Frankenstein* is the classic and perhaps best example. In James Whale's 1931 film, Dr. Frankenstein's labora-

tory, with its battery of crackling generators, cathode tubes and steaming expressionist beakers, evokes not enlightened scientific inquiry but the dark supernatural world of the Gothic. Thus the creature is transformed from the nimble and articulate being of Shelley's novel, an effective metaphor of Romantic overreaching and developing industrialization, into a lumbering, grunting monster. The movie is less interested in the moral implications of genetic engineering than in the frightening spectacle of Boris Karloff's stiff-legged strut and Jack Pierce's menacing make-up, and so shifts the focus from the doctor's dilemma to the revenge of the creature. (Hence the popular misconception that the story is named for the creature, not the scientist.) Typically, it is the visual, palpable presence of the Other, rather than its ideological, scientific or philosophic implications, that is foregrounded.

Robin Wood has argued convincingly that recent American cinema generally has tended to construct the viewer as childlike,⁹ but the contemporary science fiction film, perhaps most explicitly, has located its sense of wonder (and hence the spectator) in the wide-eyed child. This development, of course, was engineered primarily by the huge success of both George Lucas in his *Star Wars* trilogy and Steven Spielberg in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T.* (1982), as well as by the comic book sensibility of the Superman movies. John Carpenter's *Starman* (1984) is also relevant here, since in taking the human form of Jeff Bridges the alien becomes endearingly child-like in his innocence of earthly ways, similar to the "newborn" robot in *Short Circuit* (John Badham, 1986).

Joe Dante has also contributed to this trend, but *Gremlins* (1983), *The Explorers* (1985), and his segment of *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1984) are more complex, double-edged works: they appeal to the wonderment of children while, at the same time, offering adults ironic commentaries upon the Spielbergian vision. Indeed, before Spielberg recuperated children for science fiction, young people (with the rare exception of such films as Joseph Losey's *The Damned/These Are the Damned* [1961] and Wolf Rilla's *Children of the Damned* [1963]) were more frequently figures of horror than innocence. From *The Bad Seed* (Mervyn Le Roy, 1956) to *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) and *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), horror films have depicted children possessed by evil. These films seem

concentrated in the '60s and early '70s, and may be read as embodying adult fears of being possessed by children, that is, of being obligated to them, an expression of cultural backlash against the centrality of the nuclear family in a decade of sexual change and liberation.

The first *Invaders from Mars*, directed by William Cameron Menzies in 1953, in its emphasis on a child protagonist, was unusual for its time. There was the occasional juvenile science fiction movie like *The Invisible Boy* (Herman Hoffman, 1957), and the cycle of monster movies about teenage alienation beginning with *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (Gene Fowler, Jr. 1957) and *The Blob* (Irvin S. Yeaworth, 1958), but these films are now of only marginal interest. It is interesting that *Invaders from Mars*, a somewhat anomalous film of its day, should be chosen as one of the recent science fiction remakes—an indication of the important relation of children to the genre now. But it is also interesting because the original may be seen as resisting, to some extent, the political ideology of its day, while the remake recuperates the implications of the first version and transforms it into a movie characteristic of Hollywood in the Reagan era.

Menzies' film usually receives only passing notice, if it is mentioned at all, in books devoted to the science fiction film. Its special effects, except for the physical appearance of the martian, are crude—the androids wear green cloth suits with clearly visible zippers—and this, I suspect, is largely responsible for the movie's critical neglect. There is little criticism of the film, or of Menzies and his *oeuvre*. It is difficult to view Menzies as an auteur, since his output as director was not great, and had little apparent consistency, stylistically or thematically.¹⁰ The attitude towards science articulated in Menzies' first film as director, *Things To Come* (1936, screenplay by H.G. Wells from his book), is avowedly technocratic, apparently in direct opposition to the view of *Invaders from Mars*. The latter film, moreover, suffered from studio interference which, among other things, forced the inclusion of stock footage of the United States army, sequences which clearly harm the pace of the film. Actually, Menzies is known more as a set designer than as a director, having worked with Milestone, Hitchcock, and other important Hollywood directors. He designed his own sets for *Invaders from Mars*, and they effectively enhance the feeling of entrapment by the main character, the young boy David, as in,

for example, the radically foreshortened police station.

The plot is a science fiction variation of the boy who cried wolf. From his bedroom window, David one night witnesses a flying saucer land in the sandy field near his home. He tells his parents, and of course they refuse to believe him. But he sticks to his story, and so the next morning his father goes off to inspect the sand pit and returns acting strangely. The same thing then happens to his mother. As we discover later, they have been sucked underground by the martian, programmed through needles attached to the base of their necks, and reappeared as emotionless zombies to carry out the alien's sabotage scheme. One by one, other people in the town are taken over, with no one aware of what is transpiring except David. Finally, the boy manages to convince the authorities of the truth of his story. The nearby army base is mobilized, and the soldiers blast their way into the spacecraft. The martian and his android slaves are forced to retreat, but as the saucer attempts to take off it is destroyed by the army. The programmed humans return to waking consciousness, as if from a dream. In the coda, the boy literally wakes up—apparently it has all been a dream—and is comforted by his parents. He returns to his room, only to witness in the film's concluding shots which visually repeat the opening, the saucer landing as it had at the beginning.

The movie's depiction of the alien expressed the contemporary fear of helplessness before a rapidly advancing post-war technological society. The martian is visually marked as intelligent, with its darting and alert eyes shown in several close-ups. But except for six tentacles it lacks a body; encased in a glass bowl, the martian must be carried about by the crew of androids created to serve him. His tentacles are a literalization of his manipulative power over both androids and earthlings through technology. Ensconced in the bowl, the martian is a fearful image of a scientific elite, superior intellects who, as in John Boorman's *Zardoz* (1973), force others to do the necessary physical labour. The martian is described by a reprogrammed earthling as "mankind developed to its ultimate intelligence," and the similarities to Wells' tentacled and physically atrophied martians in *War of the Worlds* (and perhaps also to the politically loaded division between Eloi and Morlocks in *The Time Machine*) are obvious.

Also like Wells' best work, *Invaders*

from Mars is ultimately ambivalent in its attitude toward science. Most science fiction films of the period, while they may exploit anxieties over nuclear power with their metaphorical monsters, finally recuperate science with the ultimate defeat of the monster through the use of a newly invented weapon devised by scientists and decisively deployed by the military. If science causes the monster, more science will put it to rest. But in *Invaders from Mars* this convention does not appear, as the army relies merely on good old-fashioned dynamite to blow up the ship. Moreover, they leave behind the martian device for boring through solid rock, described by one soldier as something like the "ultimate weapon," and do not seem even to consider trying to salvage it. As well, the film suggests that our science is not dissimilar in its implications to the threatening technology of the martians ("mankind developed to its ultimate intelligence"): there is a noteworthy pair of high-angle shots, the volumes within the frames of both arranged similarly, of the observatory of the astronomer, Dr. Kelston, and the spacecraft's inner chamber which houses the machine for robbing people of their will. The shots imply a connection between an apparently contemplative science like astronomy and political/military power, a point further emphasized by Kelston's remark that his motive for conquering space is that "If anybody dared attack us, we could push a few buttons and destroy them in a matter of minutes."

Such a statement concisely sums up the xenophobic and reactionary politics of the science fiction films of the 1950s which, with the rare exception of a film like *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, depict aliens as fearful entities conspiring to invade and control us. *Destination Moon*, the film which launched the decade's spate of science fiction movies, envisions the first successfully manned lunar space flight and urges that "whoever controls the moon will control the Earth." When the astronauts land on the lunar surface they claim the moon "by the grace of God" and "for the benefit of mankind" in the name of the United States (not very different, really, from Neil Armstrong's "giant step for mankind" and the planting of the American flag). The film implies the existence of an interstellar domino theory and thus supports American imperialism and its rationale. Subsequent science fiction films accepted this notion as a given, and assured audiences that with a decisive combination of military might and scientific wisdom America

would make the solar system safe for democracy. As *Red Planet Mars* shows, even God was on America's side.

But *Invaders from Mars*, as I have suggested, seems to question this political view even as it presents it. The plot, which turns out to be David's nightmare, which turns out to be true, represents America's painful awakening at the dawn of the nuclear age and cold war politics. It was only a few years before that the US lost its monopoly on nuclear technology, as first the Soviet Union and then China developed their own atomic bombs and so became capable of attacking Americans "in their own backyards." The film, like so many others, warns Americans that they must be vigilant ("You're next," Kevin McCarthy screams at the audience in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) and "watch the skies" (as the journalist urges the audience at the end of *The Thing*). Significantly though, the alien Other in *Invaders from Mars* is acknowledged within the text as an extrapolation of ourselves—"mankind developed to its ultimate intelligence"—and thus subverts the xenophobic subtext characteristic of the genre at the time.

Also, David's waking up, only to see the nightmare begin again "for real," is not simply a narrative gimmick, but powerfully expresses the text's ambivalence toward science and foreign policy more than most science fiction films of the time. What is and is not real within the film's diegesis becomes confused, just as technology, which is both beneficial and harmful, has created for us a seemingly unsolvable dilemma. In apparent frustration, the film climaxes in a violent and explosive ending, taking frantic liberties with classic Hollywood editing, the so-called institutional mode of construction characteristic of American film: as David and the army scramble out of the spaceship as the dynamite charges click off the seconds before detonation, the film distorts real time and space "as if in a dream," stretching it out even more than the editing strategies typical of the Griffith last-minute rescues. The film virtually blows itself up along with the tremendous explosion of the spaceship, then reneges because it cannot resolve the issues it raises. The narrative resists closure, unlike the conventional science fiction climax wherein science is redeemed.¹¹

I certainly don't mean to suggest that Menzies' *Invaders from Mars* offers a profound analysis or critique of the politics of its day; it probably wouldn't even support the kind of detailed political significance Raymond Durgnat per-



Invaders from Mars: Louise Fletcher, after the takeover.

ceives in *This Island Earth* (Joseph Newman, 1955).¹² Nevertheless, the film remains genuine in its concerns, an example of what Wood refers to as an "incoherent text."¹³

Hooper's remake, though, is quite different in tone. Most obviously, it is self-conscious about its predecessor, containing a number of jokes which assume a knowledge of the first version. For example, the school David attends is named Menzies High; the original martian is found in his bowl neglected among some junk in the school basement; and the policeman (played by Jimmy Hunt, the boy in the original) who goes over the hill to investigate the sandpit, says, "I haven't been up here since I was a kid."

The film reveals its self-consciousness in other ways, primarily through its casting. In addition to Jimmy Hunt, there is Louise Fletcher, who brings her role as Big Nurse in *One Flew Over the*

Cuckoo's Nest to inflect her character of the overbearing schoolteacher taken over by the martian; Bud Cort, the romantic idealist in Altman's *Brewster McCloud*, who here heads the team from SETI (Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence), who wants to speak to the alien and is promptly incinerated; and Lorraine Newman who, as David's zombified mother, reprises her Conehead character from television's *Saturday Night Live* show and woodenly jokes, "There is nothing to be afraid of, David Gardner." These in-jokes are addressed to the "baby boomer" generation, those who likely had seen the film as children (this is increasingly a marketing strategy for entertainment, from *The Big Chill* to the numerous rock anthology LP sets, some explicitly labelled "Baby Boomer Edition," to the special Trivial Pursuit game). Unlike say, the references to other films in French new wave films which commented on the nature of film

and the film experience, these injokes work essentially as nostalgia, re-placing the viewer in his or her childhood relation to the cinema.

Aside from the altered tone, the most significant difference between the two versions is that in Hooper's the figure of the astronomer, Dr. Kelston, is entirely absent. In Menzies' film, even before being programmed by the martian, David's father refuses to talk to his wife about "rumours"—what his work at the aerospace plant actually entails—and this refusal to talk all too soon becomes an *inability* to do so. This secretive attitude toward science can be related to the controlling martian in his glass bowl, as discussed previously; thus his fate at the hands (or rather, tentacles) of the martian is a frightening extrapolation of his normal behaviour. So when David flees his parents after they are taken over, he finds comforting alternative parents in the female physician and the male astronomer who, despite his militaristic remarks, is treated as essentially sympathetic. In Hooper's version the physician is transformed into a sympathetic school nurse, but the astronomer has no equivalent. (David's rejection of the father also provides material for an interesting psychoanalytic reading, a level of meaning somewhat emphasized by Hooper: for example, the martian's burrowing tool, which

leaves behind numerous orifices, resembles a giant phallus complete with blades and looks like a prop left over from Ken Russell's *Lizstomania*; David insultingly calls the martian "dick-brain" and so on. However, such an examination is different from, although not entirely unconnected with, my concerns here, and would require another essay to explore adequately.)

In the first version, David's father works for the company manufacturing the rocket that will initiate the age of space exploration. The martians are afraid that earthlings are not responsible enough beings to enter outer space, and so seek to sabotage the project. In Hooper's version, David's father works for NASA, and the Martian has come to Earth because a Viking probe actually did discover evidence of life on Mars, but had the information suppressed in the media. As a scientist hypothesizes, the martians have come because they don't want to be found or disturbed. That the martians seem to have a legitimate point is never considered; it is as if Mars is perceived, as it was in the '50s, as a place to plant the American flag and preserve democracy. The martians can make no claims on their planet, rather like, from the American point of view, Libya in the Gulf of Sidra or even Canada in the North Sea. Mars is merely an extension of what the US con-

siders to be international waters, and as the cigar-chomping general asserts to David, "Don't look so sombre, boy, we're not out of options yet. Marines have no qualms about killing Martians." To try to reason with them, as the fate of the Bud Cort character demonstrates, is a romantic/liberal "bleeding heart" folly, as wrongheaded as Carrington's attempt to communicate with *The Thing* in the '50s.

When the military gears up for its confrontation with the martian, David's house and school become an armed camp. Rumbling tanks surround the domestic space of the family home; sandbags are piled up and floodlights play across the scene. Such images are shocking, an attack on the complacent "it can't happen here" attitude, much like *The Red Menace*, the Pentagon film mentioned earlier. While similar images appear in the original version of *Invaders from Mars*, they are particularly relevant now—in fact, there has been a resurgence of such imagery in recent American cinema. *Red Dawn* popularized it a few years ago: here Soviet paratroopers land in the local schoolyard, then shoot the teacher; a drive-in cinema becomes a political detention camp; soldiers occupy a McDonald's restaurant; and the marquee of the local cinema advertises *Alexander Nevsky*. Other films, like *Invasion USA*, followed,



Invaders from Mars: Earthlings confront alien culture.

and the avenger films such as *First Blood* and *Missing In Action* express the inevitable response to this besieged mentality. These movies say that America must fight now, in Nicaragua, Grenada, or anywhere else it is necessary, before the enemy is found on the doorstep.

What I'm suggesting, in short, is that the Hooper version of *Invaders from Mars* marks a shift from a film which below the surface may be read as questioning the ideology of Eisenhower America to one which completely endorses Reagan policy. The literal father surrogate is thus unnecessary in the second version, for the paternalistic aura of Ronald Reagan permeates it. That such militant patriotism along with an emphasis on the traditional values of the nuclear family exists in the film is yet another way *Invaders from Mars* is representative of its genre today. *Outland*, for example, is an obvious call for the necessity for strong-willed individuals to maintain law and order against the threat of corruption; *Aliens* may on one level be seen as a parable about terrorism. The aliens are "unthinking," "heartless" creatures who literally kidnap Americans and sequester them (in cocoons) for their own purposes. In fact, they kidnap an entire outpost of earthlings—that is, innocent Americans abroad—and again the military is called in. Whatever criticism of capitalism existed in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) through its depiction of "the Company," is successfully muted in the sequel. The Marine platoon sent in to do battle with the aliens is redeemed of its initial ineptitude through a combination of ultimate bravery under pressure, a lack of sexism in the mixed ranks, and the fetishization of its high-tech weaponry. Taking up most of the action, the battle between marines and aliens reminds one of the army's incursion into the sewers of Los Angeles to wipe out the nest of giant ants in *Them!*—not coincidentally, another of those '50s science fiction movies that can be read as a metaphor for the dangers of communist infiltration. Also, the Company itself is recuperated through the strategy Roland Barthes calls "inoculation":¹⁴ it is one individual, the Company's representative, who is revealed as corrupt, not the system.

Like the horror film, the science fiction genre has the potential for a progressive resistance to dominant ideology. As certain critics have noted,¹⁵ many directors have concentrated on working within the horror genre—George A. Romero, Wes Craven and Larry Cohen are among the most

important—precisely for this reason. The premise of a horror tale necessarily reflects back upon that which is feared and thus repressed in society, and so a horror story can expose this repression—or, of course, merely exploit it. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978), and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1985) are great horror films precisely because each in a different way succeeds in making us aware of these psychological/ideological implications. Similarly, the extrapolative function of science fiction holds up to us a distorting rather than mimetic mirror, revealing the potential, the implications, of things and situations. In asking us "What if . . . ?" science fiction can force us to be active rather than passive spectators.

There are some recent science fiction films that, of course, have performed this function successfully. Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983), for example, uses contemporary New York in imaginative ways to project feminist issues into the future. *Enemy Mine* (1986), although it offers a "broken arrow," liberal approach to racial understanding (a black actor, Lou Gossett, is cast as the alien), is at least progressive in its view of the Other. *Liquid Sky* (Slava Tsukerman, 1982) and *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, 1986) also stand out for their imagination and perceptive ideological critiques. But these films are the exceptions that prove the rule. More representative of the current crop of science fiction films is, say, *2010* (1985), which both redeems computer technology by clearing HAL's reputation and encouraging a mystical faith, and Cronenberg's version of *The Fly*, which he has managed to turn into another of his stories exploiting our culture's fear of the body. These fears have been amplified recently first by herpes and then AIDS, diseases which have made Cronenberg the perfect director for the '80s and its increasingly vocal espousers of reactionary sexual politics. (The exposure of Rock Hudson as both gay and ravaged by AIDS has served as a potent icon in this regard.) But, despite its progressive potential, what the science fiction cinema consistently offers now, as *Invaders from Mars* demonstrates so well, is not an exploration but an exaggeration and exploitation of the ideological problems which have brought us to the perilous state we are now in. It couldn't be more appropriate that Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative has been dubbed "Star Wars." □

NOTES

1. See, for example, Christopher Sharrett, "The Idea of Apocalypse in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*," in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry K. Grant (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp. 255-276; and Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *American Nightmare*, Andrew Britton, et. al. (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), pp. 7-28.
2. Bruce Kawin, "The Funhouse and *The Howling*," *Film Quarterly*, XXXV, no. 1 (Fall 1981), pp. 25-31.
3. Robin Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 162.
4. John Baxter, *Science Fiction in the Cinema*, ed. Peter Cowie (New York: Paperback Library, 1970), p. 100.
5. Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Delta, 1966), pp. 209-225.
6. See, for example, Damon Knight, *In Search of Wonder*, 2nd. ed. (Chicago: Advent, 1967), esp. pp. 12-13, 72.
7. Martin Rubin, "Genre and Technology: Variant Attitudes in Science Fiction Literature and Film," *Persistence of Vision*, Nos. 3/4 (Summer 1986), p. 107.
8. Sontag, *op. cit.*, p. 213.
9. Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, Chap. 8
10. As John Baxter remarks, "Unfortunately there are few films to which we can refer confident in the knowledge that they represent [Menzies'] pure vision." *Op. Cit.*, p. 67.
11. Sontag offers a "model scenario" for the narratives of conventional science fiction films. *Op. cit.*, pp. 209-212.
12. Raymond Durgnat, *Durgnat on Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), pp. 218-234.
13. Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, Chap. 4
14. See Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), esp. 150-151.
15. See, for example, *Planks of Reason* and *American Nightmare*.

THE TERMINATOR

Beyond Classical Hollywood Narrative

by Lillian Necakov

Violent exploitation thriller about a 21st-century computerized man who is sent back into time to kill a woman who holds a secret to the future.

from *Movies on TV*,
conceived and edited
by Stephen H. Scheuer, 1985

THE ABOVE DESCRIPTION of James Cameron's *The Terminator* seems, at most, crude and shallow. The suggestion is that *The Terminator* is 'just another Hollywood action film' with lots of blood and guts and very little of anything else. Although *The Terminator* fits into the classical Hollywood narrative style, it also divorces itself from that tradition. It is always fascinating to find a film which works within the limitations of classical Hollywood and at the same time manages to be subversive and ideologically challenging. *The Terminator*, therefore, deserves a close examination of both its text and sub-text.

Most obviously, the film fits the pattern of classical Hollywood narrative through the creation of an order (Sarah Connor/Linda Hamilton's everyday life, and, for that matter, the pattern of everyday life in Los Angeles in 1984), the disturbance of that order, and the final restoration of that order or the replacement of the old order with a new one.

This is what we see on the narrative level, but if we attempt to look beyond the text and examine both the beginning and the ending of *The Terminator* more closely we see that Cameron is doing something quite different. What we are shown as the first shot before the credits (Los Angeles in 2029) is not the order

usually established at the outset of a classical narrative, but the disorder that will follow. So, although the shot after the credits (LA in 1984) is, in a sense, the real establishing shot, Cameron is giving us an alternative. It is the same with the ending of the film. We see the semblance of a restored order, when, in fact, Sarah is merely driving off towards the disorder depicted at the very opening of the film. This becomes apparent when the little boy at the gas station says that there is a storm coming and Sarah replies, "I know."

The film seems to be constantly foretelling what is going to happen. With the opening scene we know what to expect from the future as well as what is going to happen—to a certain extent—in the present. Here again, the film parts dramatically with classical narrative. It becomes obvious that the film is cyclical and that what has happened will have to keep happening, so that there could never be a real ending. At the film's end, Sarah, taping a message for her son, says that she is not sure if she should tell him about his father, because if she does that may influence his decision to send Reese/Michael Biehn to the past; if Reese isn't sent, Sarah tells her son, ". . . you could never exist." This seems to imply that the story could never end, that Reese must keep coming back into the past to ensure that John Connor will be able to exist. This is one of the many complexities of the film's narrative, setting it apart, both stylistically and ideologically, from many Hollywood films.

Another of the film's complexities is Reese. He does not actually exist in the past, that is, he was born after 1984. During one of their conversations near the beginning of the film, Sarah asks Reese if he saw the nuclear war—which is to take place a few years later—and

Reese explains that he grew up after it. The part of Reese raises all sorts of religious and Freudian implications and at the same time offers an alternative view of these.

Firstly, the fact that Reese is John Connor's father is in itself fascinating, since Reese is also, we learn, John's close friend and the two are about the same age. This is where the film becomes truly engaging, as well as difficult. We can begin by looking at Sarah as the 'Mother,' for she is the one who is to give birth to John Connor who, according to Reese, is the man who taught the human resisters of the future to fight. She is not only the 'Mother,' she is also the "Mother of the future," as we are told in the scene where Reese and Sarah are under a bridge, hiding. Sarah says, "Come on, do I look like the mother of the future to you?" The Terminator, then, can be seen as the 'Father' of the future, since it is the machines which have taken over after the war. And finally, we can see Reese as the 'Son,' because he is, after all, the same age as John—from the same generation. He also says at one point that he is about the same height as John, strengthening the comparison. We can, then, look at the three main characters in terms of an Oedipal relationship. The 'Son'/Reese wants to kill the 'Father'/the Terminator and have the 'Mother'/Sarah. The film overthrows the 'correct' Oedipal resolution by allowing the 'son' to have the 'Mother,' and the 'Mother' to kill the 'Father.' (It is Sarah who finally destroys the Terminator.) However, it is even more complex than that: at the same time the film also deals with the issue of the woman's place in society.

It is refreshing, in the '80s, to find a film in which women are allowed power



The Terminator: Sarah (Linda Hamilton) and Reese (Michael Biehn).

and control, and, above all, are not subordinated by the male. At the same time the woman is not sexually objectified, and she is allowed to transcend gender role expectations. From the very first time we see Sarah, we are aware of her strength and independence. We are shown a medium close-up of Sarah's face as she rides her moped, we then see her get off, park it, and say to the 'male' statue in front of the restaurant she works at, "Guard it for me, big buns." She is confident, walking with a quick, strong stride. The way Sarah is dressed throughout seems quite significant in light of the way she is treated as a woman. Mostly, she wears jeans and sneakers and the only time she is ever dressed in a way which doesn't fit in with her character is when she is at work and is shown in a pink dress and knee socks. The whole scene in the restaurant plays on the idea of woman as the object of desire, as well as the subordination of women. Most, if not all, of the people

waiting on tables are women and they all wear pink frilly dresses, reminiscent of a little girl's clothing. The way in which Sarah is treated by her customers is significant since they are mainly men: she is expected to serve them, since that is her job, but the way in which she is *told* what to get—not really asked—implies that since she is a woman it is her place to serve men their food. It is also noteworthy that the child who puts ice cream in Sarah's dress pocket is male.

Cameron gives us this view of women, but then allows Sarah to break away from that and show us the other side. We see Sarah and her friend Ginger getting ready to go out, and then we find out that Sarah's date has cancelled. Sarah does not sit around at home, instead she goes out on her own—on her moped—to a film. Later, we see her in a restaurant alone, eating pizza. Sarah does not depend on men, she can manage on her own.

The fact that Sarah drives a moped seems significant: it immediately sets her apart, while at the same time paralleling her with the only other motorcyclist in the film—the Terminator, until the end the most powerful character in the film.

Sarah and Reese's camaraderie also plays an important role. In the hotel room scene Sarah helps Reese make bombs. She is also left with the gun when Reese goes out to get supplies. She is allowed possession of the symbolic phallus—the same gun that Reese shoved into his pants when he was running away from the police in an earlier scene.

When Sarah and Reese make love, it is Sarah who initiates it. And during their lovemaking, Sarah is the one who is on top—in the 'dominant' position. What attracts Reese to Sarah is her strength, courage, and ability to fight—which we find out to be literal by the end of the film. When Reese and Sarah are hiding under the bridge and Reese

tells Sarah about John Connor, he talks about the fact that she taught her son John to fight and to survive. He tells Sarah that by coming through time he got a chance to meet the "legend," Sarah Connor. Reese also carries a picture of Sarah (the same photograph taken by the little boy at the end of the film) and he explains that he memorized every line and curve of her face, and how it seemed to him that Sarah was just a little bit sad in the picture. He says that he always wondered what she was thinking at the time. These are quite unconventional reasons—at least within the realm of classical Hollywood—for a man to love a woman.

Perhaps the point at which Sarah is allowed the ultimate transgression of her position as a woman is near the end of the film when she destroys the Terminator, the symbol of ultimate masculinity and power (it is virtually indestructible; it is the character with the most guns). The fact that Sarah is the one who destroys it makes the transference of power to Sarah even more subversive. Schwarzenegger's star image plays an important part in the film. He is usually the unbeatable tough guy, and he is a bodybuilder, which further contributes to the impact of a woman being able to defeat the Terminator. Although there are other moments in the film when Sarah helps Reese fight the Terminator (when Reese is shot and Sarah gets him out of the truck, echoing Reese's first 'flash-forward' when his combat partner is a woman; when Sarah breaks the window of the factory to allow herself and Reese entrance), it is only at the end, after Reese's death, when she is completely on her own, that we see Sarah as a strong, independent woman who is responsible for her own survival.

There is another very important element in *The Terminator*'s re-evaluation of the position of women: at the very end of the film, Sarah is alone and pregnant—she does not have a husband, nor did she ever have one. Within the context of classical Hollywood cinema, Sarah should be punished for the consequences of her sexual activity outside of wedlock. In a sense, the Terminator's pursuit of her could be seen as her punishment. The Terminator is the embodiment of macho and a male-dominated world, and in a sense an extreme right-wing world, since the Terminator is associated with a storm-trooper through his boots, accent and the fact that we are told there are death camps in the future which are run by Terminators. The punishment is defini-

tively repudiated: Sarah survives, destroys the Terminator and all he stands for, and drives into the future to continue fighting alone. The gun she carries at the film's end symbolizes the power she has obtained.

Going hand-in-hand with the idea that Sarah has done nothing wrong by having a child outside of wedlock, is the idea of Sarah as a new Virgin Mary. If we look at the scene in which Reese and Sarah are hiding out under the bridge, Reese tells Sarah about her as-yet-unborn son. Reese tells her his name is John Connor, and she says, "Well, at least now I know what to name him." It seems that their whole discourse here can be viewed as the Annunciation, with Reese as the angel Gabriel, telling Sarah/Mary that she is going to have a son. Reese knows for a fact that there will be a John Connor—the same initials as Jesus Christ—and he merely relays the information to Sarah. The fact that John will be a leader of the people and that Reese says, "I'd die for John Connor," also links John Connor to Jesus Christ. Not only do we get the idea of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, but we get the entire Holy Trinity, with Reese as the 'Father,' John as the 'Son,' and the Holy Ghost, of course, the disembodiment of them both. The fact that Sarah sleeps with Reese, even though the Annunciation has already taken place, seems to be one of the ways in which the film is difficult while at the same time offering alternatives to the 'norm.' Thus, we are presented with the idea of Sarah as the powerful, independent woman and the Virgin Mary all in one.

The Terminator is not only subversive in its depiction of women, but in its depiction of men as well. Most of the men in the film are treated humorously. The exceptions are Reese and, to an extent, Lt. Traxler, one of the only men in the police station who is sympathetic, and the only black man in the film. All the other men in the police station are depicted in a comic fashion: Traxler's partner, for example, is always trying to tell stories about previous cases which are not relevant, and the police psychiatrist is completely ridiculous in his appearance and his discussions with Reese about the existence of ray guns in the future. The Terminator himself is often depicted humorously, especially in the scene when the cleaner knocks on his door and he chooses "Fuck you, asshole" as the appropriate response. The entire scene when the Terminator drives into the front of the police station is played for macabre humour ("I'll be

back"), and the fact that, once he's in the station, no one can do anything to stop him seems to be making light of macho men who think they can protect themselves with guns.

Reese and the Terminator are also paralleled many times throughout the film, and this is significant if we look at the Terminator as a product of man—in fact, the ultimate macho image. (Reese explains to Sarah that after the nuclear war the machines and computers took over and that they, in turn, created factories where Terminators were built.) The function of the parallels is mostly to show the dichotomy between the two products of the future. The first parallel is when Reese and the Terminator come through time. The Terminator is obviously not hurt while Reese is. Later, the Terminator is shown killing people simply to get clothes and weapons, whereas Reese does not kill for such things. One of the most striking parallels is that during the course of the film, both Reese and the Terminator are wounded in the right arm and on the left side of the face. There is another point when a parallel is drawn: when we see the Terminator in the police car looking for Sarah and Reese, we are shown a medium close-up of the front door of the car, on which is written, "to care and to protect." Earlier in the film, when Reese opened the door of a police car to steal a rifle, we saw the same words. After the scene in which the Terminator shoots the gun-shop owner, we immediately cut to a shot of Reese sawing off the end of his shot gun. This seems important in view of the whole macho image of men. Reese is not afraid to 'shorten his phallus,' as it were, whereas the Terminator needs as many guns as he can get.

The parallels, in fact, have two major functions: a) to show that the Terminator is, in fact, a product that man himself has created in man's own macho image, and b) to set Reese apart and to show that man need not fill that stereotypical role.

One can see how, in many ways, *The Terminator* breaks with the traditions of classical Hollywood ideology and sex stereotyping and offers alternatives, as well as inviting many different readings of its complex text and sub-text. It is one of those films which work within the confines of Hollywood yet still manage to subvert many of the assumptions that the majority of Hollywood films embody. □

OPPOSITE: *The Terminator*: Arnold Schwarzenegger.



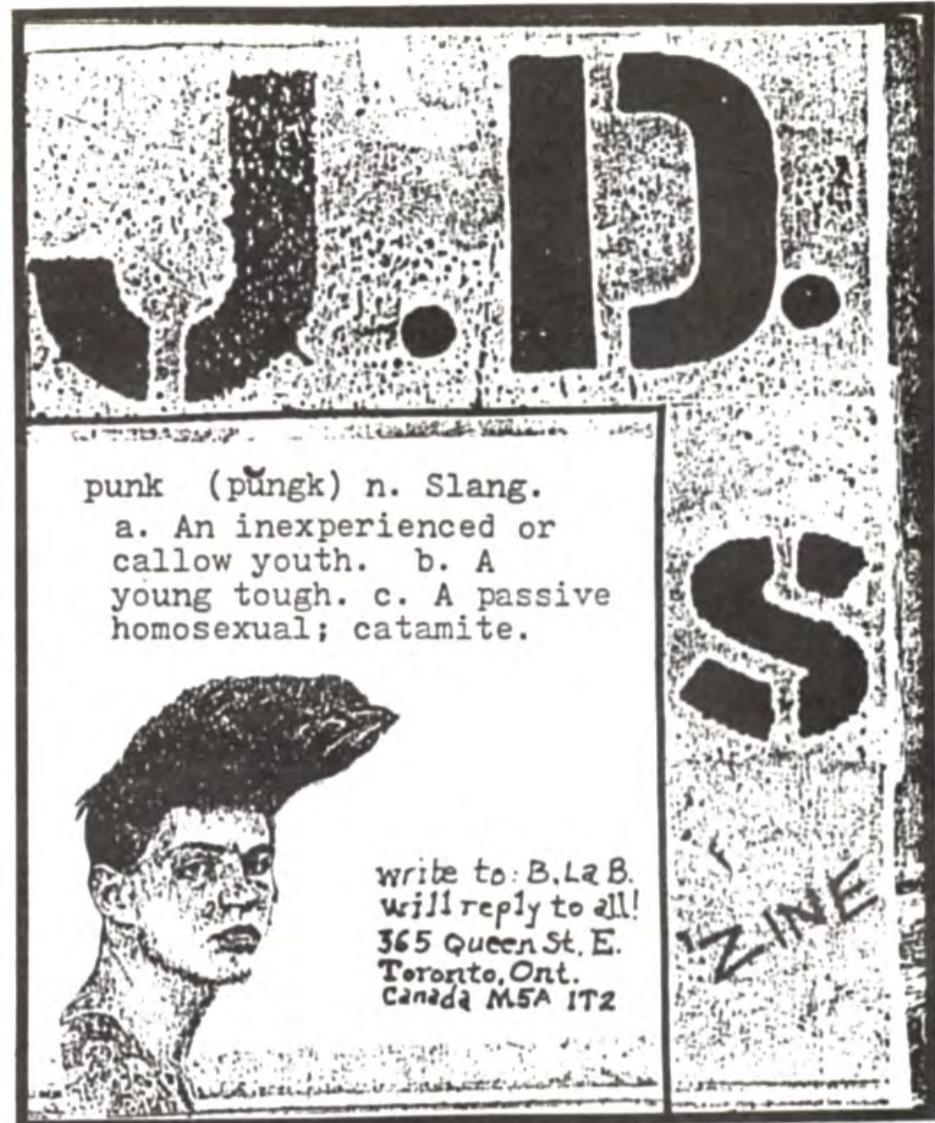
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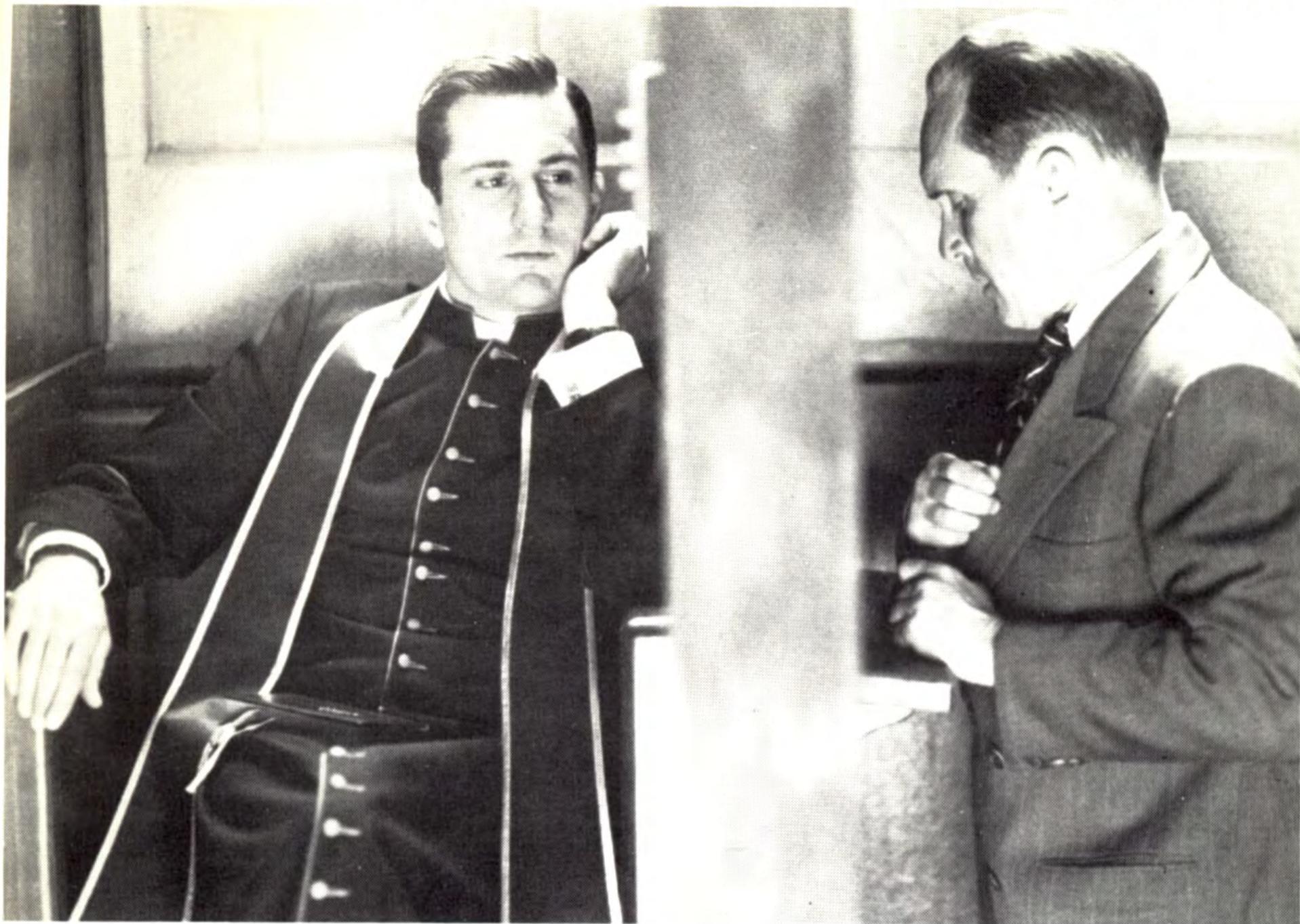


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Back cover: Frederic Forrest in **One From the Heart**.



3

REVALUATION:

F.R. Leavis, and films by
Coppola, Ford, Lynch, Perrault,
Pasolini, Sirk, Sternberg, Wenders